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PART 1

*Joie de vivre...*

(Joy to live...)

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*Loving somebody takes you on cloud nine and receiving the same love in return keeps you there...*

## Attraction between Antigen and Antibody

1:43 a.m.

Apurv: Hi, again.

Radhika: Now, u r spoiling my mood!

Apurv: Wait!! Rat.

Radhika: Hii...

Apurv: Big rat.

here

in my room.

Dunno whr it went;

maybe smwhr near my suitcase

hiding

u dere?

Radhika: M in hell.

Apurv: LOL.

Really there was a big rat here

Dunno whr the hell has it come from...

Radhika: *Toh usska soup banake peena tha kya?* Anywayz

Sophia shifted 2 my room.

Apurv: It will rip off clothes and other food items.

Radhika: What d hell! U think that u can catch d rat.

Apurv: No just to throw it outside the room.

Radhika: *Apne baal kutterwalo usse.*

Apurv: *Milega tab na...* Let me get hold of it first.

Radhika: Okay.

Apurv: Okay!

Nine minutes.

1:58 a.m.

Apurv: Hey! Got disconnected... U there?

Radhika: I hate u.

Apurv: Is this what I tell u when u get dc?

Radhika: U were not listening 2 me 4 last 4 hrs...

The chat went on and on...and continued till 5 a.m...

Trinnngggg...!

"Get up...!"

"Get up...! It's time for class...It's 10 a.m.," Tanu shouted.

It was Radhika's roommate. "Radhikaaaaa..."

After calling umpteenth times, she stopped for a few minutes and then started yelling again, "When did you sleep last night? I saw you chatting quite late. Wake up. It's time for college."

Radhika got up and tried to take a view of the room. She saw a blurred image of Tanu standing in front of the mirror, getting ready for the class! Radhika smiled and said, "Oh! It wasn't that late, last night. I slept after catching a glimpse of the rising sun. It was so mesmerising. You should also try it once."

"Everyone isn't mad like you," Tanu replied.

"So, did he say anything?" she asked whisperingly after coming close to Radhika.

"Yeah, he did say; he said many things, but not what I wanted to hear. I hope, some day he will," sighed Radhika.

Tanu said, "So this chatting thing will go on and on."

Radhika, "Hmm...yeah...let's see!"

They got dressed and left for college.

Not far from Radhika's room, the scene was no different at AT-144, Kings Palace IV.

"Oh shit!! It's 9:50 a.m.! Wake up Shants! We are gon'na be late for the Economics class," exclaimed Apurv.

Shantanu replied casually, “Let’s sleep a bit more. What the hell! My attendance is 60 per cent; we can easily bunk the class. Wan’na checkout the latest Hollywood flick?”

Apurv said, “Hey man! Get ready. We are not going to miss our class.”

On the way to their class, Shantanu asked Apurv, “Hey dude, what are you up to these days?? Slept really late last night? Huh!!”

Apurv replied casually, “Nothing bro. Just doing some research on the net and trying out new softwares.”

Shantanu said, “Sometimes I feel my roomie has become a vampire. Let me check your neck,” and took hold of Apurv’s collar.

Apurv cried, “Stop it dude!! Get moving, otherwise Sreelekha will kick us out of the class.”

“Yeah! Sreelekha! Can’t afford to miss her class.”

Shantanu was fascinated by the idea of spheres. But another event fostered a better perception in him and Shantanu exclaimed majestically, “Enough time left. Still enough to catch the movie.”

“Shut up Shants...” snapped Apurv.

A group of seniors sitting in front of Juice Point were watching them from a distance as if waiting to ambush.

“Hey you, white shirt?” one of them shouted. *Typical call.*  
“Did you hear anything? He smirked. *Typical ignorance.*

I didn’t,” Shantanu said to Apurv.

“You white and blue, come here.”

This time it was too loud to be neglected.

“Yes...sir,” chorused Apurv and Shantanu.

“You first years, roaming around in T-shirt; think you are very smart...ehh? What’s your name?”

“Apurv.”

“Only Apurv? Mr, Mrs, or what?”

“Mr Apurv Malhotra.”

“Take out your I-card. Replace ‘card’ with tennis and ‘t’ in tennis with ‘p’ and read aloud in front of the girls sitting there,” the bearded senior ordered.

Apurv took out his I-card and went towards the girls.

**Instructions:**

This *card* is not transferable. This *card* is valid for the period mentioned overleaf. Loss of this *card* should be informed immediately to the concerned authority. Duplicate *card* will be issued on payment of Rs 200 after due verification. This *card* can also be used as Health *Card* for treatment in KIMS.

The senior gals were impressed by their courage.

Ultimately freed, they ran towards class.

Apurv said, “May I come in, ma’am?”

Being interrupted in the middle of the class, Miss Sreelekha grumbled, “Is it the time to come to class?”

“Err...well...I went to drop my sister to the railway station, so became a bit late...” Shantanu replied sheepishly. *Typical excuse*. Excuses are always on your lips if you are a student, especially engineering students.

“...And I was accompanying him...” added Apurv.

“Get inside and take care from next class...so, what was I explaining? Yeah, concept of supply. So...” Sreelekha continued her monotone while Apurv and Shantanu consolidated the back bench. Electives like Economics and English Communication never go well with *to-be* engineers.

“Law of supply states that if the price of a commodity  $\uparrow$ , the supply also  $\uparrow$ . These are directly proportional elements and have a linear curve with slope greater than 1...”

“Dude, this whole thing is crap...laws formulated 1,500 years ago...policies of Kautilya age...check this out...blue films are in demand, so they are in supply. This short bitch with good boobs says price ↓, demand goes ↑, so supply should increase, isn't it?” Srikant gave a quizzical look to the fellow backbenchers. The *bitch* carried on monotonously.

“This law is not followed by inferior goods, like brown rice, wheat bread and...”

“...*Khadi ka condom*,” shouted the backbenchers in unison.

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The gleaming rays of the sun fell on the campus of KIIT University as the cool winter breeze rustled over the lush green campus. Located in the temple city of Bhubaneswar, this university was spread over 500 acres of landscape with more than 15,000 students studying in various disciplines. Among the various schools of the university, the School of Technology was the premier one and within four years of becoming a deemed university, it had acquired one of the top positions among the Indian engineering colleges. The fat pay packages and the surety of getting placed in MNCs attracted students and their parents from all over the country.

Radhika and Apurv were among the ones pursuing engineering from this college. It was the autumn semester of the first year of engineering. Radhika was in Electronics and Telecommunication while Apurv belonged to the School of Computer Science.

Belonging to different places, their destinies collided when they took admission in KIIT.

The commencement of their relationship took place when Apurv arbitrarily sent Radhika a friendly request over Orkut, the modern day *kabootar*. Radhika had accepted the request despite

not knowing him, as many friends were common in their lists and he belonged to the same college.

After a few weeks of chatting over Orkut, Radhika added his name on G-talk account. Gradually their bonding grew strong when both of them realised that they harboured similar thoughts. They started to share their opinions on whatever topics they discussed, be they youthful topics like music, camping, Enrique, novels, adventure sports, fashion, or intense ones like inter-caste marriages, religions, business, career, mythology, dowry, research, government policies and what not.

Seldom did it happen that they were on the opposite ends of the river, but whenever it did happen, they blissfully debated out their perceptions even if these involved a peaceful war of words.

The duration of the chats grew with every passing day. The clock ticked on, the hours rolled by but their chats never ended before the crack of dawn. Earlier it started off with an hour...then it grew to 2...then 4...and so on, showing an exponential rise resembling in a geometric progression.

Even they didn't realise when they became an integral part of each other's life over the past two months, when they first started chatting on Orkut.

Since then, there had never been a day when they did not chat.

Thus their routine included leaving for college at 10 a.m., waging a war with the classes and professors throughout the day while looking forward to meeting each other over G-talk again in the evening before rushing back to their respective hostels at 5 p.m. and flinging their laptops open. Whoever reached first got online and waited eagerly for the other to get online, while counting each and every second.

*Initial infatuation it was, but how?*

The same schedule was followed every day. Dusk had descended over the azure sky. Apurv's and Radhika's classes got over. They both returned to their respective hostels and hurriedly switched on their laptops. Radhika got online first and waited patiently for Apurv. Finally, he came online and their conversation started, but a bit differently than usual.



## Newton's 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Laws

Apurv: Buzz...

Apurv: Newton's Fourth Law: If you run around a tree with velocity more than the speed of light, you can fuck your own ass.

Newton's Fifth Law: The length of pole is directly proportional to the depth of hole.

Radhika looked at the message, disgusted but bemused. What the hell! Has he gone mad! Such lingo to me! She read the message again. It was exactly what it was.

Apurv: Hi Radhika!! Was'sup?

Oh...My God!! Shit!! He saw the chat box! Newton's Fourth and Fifth Laws of Motion on his screen. Apurv was shocked.

Radhika's basic instinct followed Newton's Third Law: *Every action has an equal and opposite reaction*. And she reacted.

Radhika: What was that?

Apurv: That wasn't meant for you! Accidentally...I mean...I was sending to some friend. I mean...suddenly the 'Enter' got pressed...

Radhika: What do you think, you can get through with anything? What has happened to your decency? How did u dare?

Apurv: M so sorry Radhs...That was unintentional...really...I did not mean to...got typed in the wrong window...

Radhika: Don't talk to me.

Apurv: M sorry...I m sorry....Really sorry...don't make fuss over it...

Wasn't intentional...

Radhika: If this happens again, don't expect me to talk to you again.

Apurv: M sorry... I promise I will take care in future.

After several apologies, Radhika got back to talking terms and Apurv heaved a sigh of relief. She always needs several lines of pleadings but even that's cute about her.

Apurv: Hey in between I won't b coming; only till exams get over...

Radhika: k..do u really get 2 study dis mch...

Apurv: At least, I shld study nw...and it's lyk our chats r never ending. Will u cum only?

Radhika: Yeah, I will.

'For whom will she come online if I am not there?' thought Apurv, for whom it was pretty annoying.

Radhika replied casually but at the core of her heart she knew that it would be difficult for her to pass her days without talking to Apurv. Although Apurv had taken the decision, he was finding it difficult to abide by his resolve.

The chat ended with a low tone after exchange of a few sentences.

Examination fever!

The situation was no different in KIIT compared to other engineering colleges. With just four days left for the first paper of Physics, night outs began, and so did the rush for notes as dawn and dusk merged for the overburdened students.

Before the commencement of exams, two days meant 48 hours of study.

Radhika was in Pamela's room to get her class notes.

"Have you got the class notes of Lorentz equation?" Radhika asked Pamela.

"You too, Radhs? I thought you were regular in class!" Pamela replied.

“I overslept the day when it was being taught...and in other subjects too, I haven't a clue of what was taught after mid-term. Four days are too few for so many subjects. The whole course has piled up on my head. I don't know what rubbish I am gonna write in the answer sheet...”

Pamela interrupted, “Do you think teachers are going to read what you have written? They will just see whether you have written something or not and on the basis of the weight of your copy, you will be marked accordingly.”

“If I won't get anything, then I am gon'na write lyrics of songs in beautiful handwriting!” Saying this, Radhika disappeared into the corridor to seek the notes.

The profit of xerox shops near the campus quadrupled their value. Faculties were troubled, attending to numerous calls from students.

“Sir, what is the syllabus? Are CRT and Field Effect Transistor included in the syllabus or not?”

“Ma'am, I am having trouble in solving the power series problem. Can I come to you to clear my doubts?”

“Will we have to draw the diagrams also?”

“Sir, please tell us some important questions.”

“Maxwell's equations were not taught in other sections and EEE (Electrical and Electronics Engineering), shall we do it?”

After having taught so many batches over the years, the professors too had become accustomed to such questions. They were familiar with the ‘Student Syndrome’ of delaying things till it became unavoidable. Call it a tradition of engineering colleges or simple human nature to take the easiest path out, the students enjoyed the liberty of staying away from home and utilised it to their benefit. They came to their senses only when the exams rang their bell.

Once a Physics professor demonstrated an inverse hyperbolic graph in front of the class. “This graph represents your college career. You are here, in the first year,” he said, pointing to the maxima and coincidentally the initial point of the curve which “gradually keeps on decreasing as time increases. Your grades will gradually go down as semesters pass by. Number of backs will outrun your age...”

“At least tell me what topics are there in the syllabus,” someone asked someone else.

“First tell me what the first exam is!” someone else replied.

“Listen man, you have got to help me out – please teach me three to four long questions so that I am able to secure at least pass marks. I don’t want more than that,” Shantanu pleaded with Apurv in a counter strike.

“Any time buddy! Come, let’s begin with the mass-energy equation,” Apurv replied.

“Sure, but first let me get through this battle slot,” Shantanu replied, clutching the mouse in his hand.

Apurv left the mass-energy equation to be derived later with Shantanu and carried on with higher electronics which was their second paper.

Three whole days passed during which Radhika and Apurv did not chat. Apurv had taken the decision of not coming online lest it affected their exams as the chatting ate up a lot of their precious study time. Even though preparations were in full swing, he wasn’t able to concentrate fully on the papers. He knew something was bothering him – he was missing the chats with Radhika.

A similar scenario prevailed in Radhika’s room. She was busy considering in detail and subjecting into analysis whether Apurv was into *her* or not, by playing ‘*he-likes-me-and-he-likes-me-not*’ games.

Just one night before the exam, Apurv came online to book train tickets for winter holidays that followed the exams. Coincidentally Radhika was also online at that time with the vague hope that he may join her online. They had a short conversation involving wishing best of luck to each other.

But luck wasn't sufficient. Next morning the Physics paper got over. Radhika and Tanu were discussing the paper sitting under a tree besides the queen's castle.

"What was the answer for the fifth question?" asked Tanu.

"Oh, finding the force one?" asked Radhika. "I got the answer as 1.75 Newton."

"Mine was 2.8 Newton."

Well, none of them were in further mood of discussing whose answer was correct.

"Anyways, leave it. Let's have *gupchup*."

"Yeah, let's go."

They took a round of the campus, had *gupchup* and returned to their hostels.

It is said that a girl's best friends are diamonds, but their new best friend was *gupchup*...in any situation...any mood. Girls will scream out for it. They can never say no to it.

Meanwhile, Apurv headed straight to Kings Palace IV as he was feeling sleepy after the gruelling Physics paper and even as an aftermath to staying awake the whole night, solving tough formulae.

"I am going to sleep. Don't wake me up till 7 p.m." said a sleepy Apurv to Shantanu, who looked lost with the question paper in his hands.

"Hope I don't get a back," said he, looking grim. Five minutes later, his grim mood took a backseat and he went off to play Age of Empire.

After a while, said a sleepy Apurv, “What are you all shouting at?”

“Just discussing which girl of our batch would you prefer to see naked?” grinned Shantanu.

Sonu, who was in sheer confusion for the past few minutes, finally came out with his opinion, “I think it should be Preeti! She would be like a barren football field. The enormous surface area would be enormously eye-soothing.”

“Finally, I, the originator of this contest, disclose my choice. I would like to see all the girls naked.”

In a similar fashion all the days of our exams flew by. The penultimate paper was Maths and Radhika was pissed off at the Power Series. It was the paper she hated most. *Many did.*

Terrified at the idea of leaving the answer sheet blank, she got online to share her desperation with online chat-friends. She was least expecting Apurv when he suddenly buzzed her.

Apurv: Hi!

Radhika: Hey! U online!! U said u won't b online till the exams got ova...

Apurv: Yeah! But got really bored by doing asymptotes. Shants told me to get online but I didn't expect you to be online at this time. So, how much have u finished?

Radhika: Nah!! The whole syllabus is left n I am upset about it.

Apurv: You really seem in despair. Let's talk something else. Wen r u leaving for home?

Radhika: M leaving on Christmas eve by 'Tapaswini Express.'

Apurv: Cool! Me too by the same train on the same day. I think most of us r returning on the same day. May be we can meet there.

Seeing this, Radhika's heart took a leap, then a flight for a few minutes and then back inside her. The chat terminated. Both went back to their preparations.

Morning came quicker than expected and the day known as Sunday was left before the M-day.

Tanu was studying.

"Is Laplace easy? Two hours are enough?" Radhika inquired.

Tanu replied wearily, "It's quite tough."

Radhika said, "We have screwed our semester. This Maths paper is going to ruin our CGPA."

Tanu started crying, "I never wanted to join an engineering college. I told my parents so many times. I simply hate this subject. If they would have just let me go into any medical college, I wouldn't have been stuck here with this stupid Maths."

Radhika wiped away her tears, "Don't worry. We will manage somehow. Bagging pass marks won't be that difficult."

But by the evening, Radhika had realised that it was impossible for them to complete the whole syllabus and getting good marks was totally out of question.

Again the usual rumours started spreading like fire, "The question paper has been leaked; exams will be postponed."

Radhika depended on the benefit of doubt and did not study properly.

At around 1 a.m., concrete information reached that although the paper had been leaked, exams would be conducted as per schedule and a new question paper had been set.

Radhika wasn't able to sleep out of terror. And then she got a headache during the exam, making her feeling sleepy. "God-damn, this can't be happening to me. I am not able to write even what I actually know."

After submitting her answer sheet, Radhika was in no mood to talk to anybody. She wasn't even able to face herself. More so as she came from an academic background with her father serving as a senior professor in the department of electronics. Since early childhood, being the eldest among four children, she had been carrying the heavy burden of his expectations. She always aspired to be engaged in something creative, where she could utilise her talent while love her job. She was good in studies. The crème de la crème of the student community in this country craves for engineering as it promises a certain future and a stable life. In middle-class families, career paths are already set for the children, the most common being medicine and engineering. Consideration for passion was next to non-existent.

The terrace awaited her. She wanted to be alone. With tear-filled eyes and a heavy heart, she climbed the stairs that led up to solitude. Finally when she reached the terrace of her hostel alone, she looked down into the narrow lane leading to the hostel from where the other students were coming after appearing for the exams she saw happy faces and her depression mounted.

She sat down on the floor in a secluded corner. Past memories came rushing in to plague her mind.

'I have enjoyed being among the elite students. What could have gone wrong? Everything was going fine till mid-semester. Before joining this college, I promised myself that I would never let myself down. This four-year period has been a testing ground. Whatever I can achieve, I have to do it now. In order to give a tough competition to all the girls of my batch, I didn't leave any stone unturned to win the Miss Fresher title. Then, progressing one more step further towards my goal, I choreographed the dance sequence with myself as the lead dancer. I burnt night oil and finally achieved good internal assessment marks in mid semester.



On the way somewhere I did go wrong. What will I tell Daddy if I fail in Maths? What will others in the class think about me? How will it feel to stay back during summer holidays to appear for the back papers?

Such questions flooded her mind. Depressed, she went to her room, flung herself on the single cot and hid her face underneath her pillow. She felt emotionally empty. Exhausted and in despair, she didn't realise when she fell asleep.

*Take me away... to a secret place. Take me away... to a sweet escape. Take me away...*

Even her cell's ringtone resembled her cry.

"Hello," Radhika answered the call.

"Hi Radhs. How are you?" It was Payal, her best friend since her secondary-school days.

"Ohh! Hi Payal! After so many days, you finally got time to call me, huh?" Radhika asked with some elation.

"Nothing like that. Was just busy with my preparations..."

"So, how's life going on? Rocking like ever? How are your exams going on? Did you make any boyfriend? How many proposals have you received yet? Broke the school record or not?"

"Hey, have mercy! Just one question at a time. Nothing is going like I had planned. I have fucked up my exams, perhaps I will fail in Maths; wasted all my time in chatting and in extra-curricular activities; didn't realise my mistake, but now it's too late."

"Listen, don't lose hope. What has happened to you? Am I talking to the same Radhs? Life surely won't end here – you only told me this when I didn't clear the engineering exam the first time. You have got the ability to do anything. What happened to the determined Radhs? Where is she?"

“Life seems to have come to a dead end. No plans for the future; no plans for present even. Most of my time is spent in sitting in front of the laptop; rest of the time is wasted in gossiping with friends and roomies. Don’t know what will happen to me. And I screwed my papers due to all these and finding no time to rectify it.”

“It’s not about studies. I am right, *na?*” she asked in a typically inquisitive, girly accent.

“See, let me put it short. Three months ago, I started chatting with a guy named Apurv. He is really sweet and intelligent. I like talking to him. We have many things in common and he is different from the other guys while others boast about how broadminded they are, he really is. He is so encouraging and unlike the others, he doesn’t keep hitting on me. And now, I don’t know what to say? To cut it short, I chat with him the whole night every day and during the rest of the day, I think of topics about which we can chat next.”

This is what she told Payal, leaving the rest unsaid. Payal understood fully.

“Wow, so you have met somebody. What does he look like?”

“Well I have not seen him in person but in his snaps he is really goodlooking. Anyways, I am going to meet him the day our exams get over.”

“So cheer up! Be in your best looks ever when you meet him and till now you have worked really hard on your career and boosted your Dad’s expectations. Now it’s time to have some fun. And about your career, if this engineering thing doesn’t work out with great looks like yours, you can always win the Miss India contest. I got to go now; okay? Take good care of yourself. ’Bye,” Payal laughed.

“Take care and best of luck,” Radhika replied.

“Best of luck for your date and keep me updated about this Apurv chapter,” Payal said.

“Thanks for calling,” Radhika said and hung up.

*Who says we are not seeing each other? We see each other  
and the story just ends there...*

## 12.5% Engineer

“Hurry up, Apurv,” prodded Satyam, trying to move out of the mess.

“Yeah, just coming bro!” Apurv replied, stuffing the *aloo parantha* into his mouth.

It was the eve of Christmas and all the hostellers of Kings Palace V were leaving the hostel for a week-long holiday. Exams were over and the first-year students were really excited to go home for the first time. Three buses waited for them outside to taken them to the station.

“Jump in. Hand me your luggage,” said Shantanu, pulling in Apurv’s luggage through the window.

“So, finally we are heading home. This exam thing has sucked all my energy,” Apurv said, entering the cabin of the bus where all his friends were sitting.

As the bus started, they gradually adjusted themselves in the crowded bus.

Apurv suddenly remembered his pre-Maths exam chat with Radhika and it struck him that they were *finally* going to meet at the station. His thoughts rushed to her.

‘Hope she has also packed up and left for the station. If it’s early, we will get enough time for a long chat. But how am I going to recognise her?’ This big question troubled his mind.

Radhika got dressed in light blue jeans and a dark blue T-shirt, with a red jacket over it. Thinking about Apurv, she started applying *kajal* and light makeup.

Tanu shouted from behind, “Miss Radhika, I do think we have got a train to catch today.”

“Yeah, all the makeup is over. I just have to brush my hair once,” replied Radhika.

“Excuse me!! It’s the 55th time you are doing that!”

“Ooohhh, Radhika! What are you up to, dear? Wan’na floor all the guys at the station?” exclaimed Sofia on entering Radhika’s room.

“No, my target is just one!” smiled Radhika mysteriously.

“Apurv, of course. Man, he should better be prepared,” she replied tauntingly.

Radhika winked back.

The clock struck 8. The hostel attendant came and informed them that the buses were about to leave.

“We are just coming,” responded all the three excitedly.

The scene at the railway station was like no other day. The young crowd of KIIT jostled with each other. Exams for all years had got over and almost all the students were leaving for their vacations.

The first-year students were very excited to go home for the first time after joining college. The girls were brightly dressed to show off to the guys and the guys, quite unlike when going for their classes, were present much on time to see the girls at the station. Girls in groups giggled as boys whizzed past them, looking at them and enjoying their freedom after the strict environment at the college.

One by one, different trains loaded with Kiitians were leaving for different parts of the country. As each left the station, the jubilant gals and guys cheered the ones inside the train as if they were returning after having won the Cricket World Cup. Even those inside the train roared loudly by poking their heads out of the windows.

Apurv and Shantanu reached the station. “The station looks so beautiful with hot girls crowding around. What do you

say, buddy?” asked Shantanu, stretching his arms and dropping his luggage on the bench behind him.

But Apurv was lost in thought, wondering as to what she would be wearing! ‘In her pictures she looked awesome. What could she be to look like in person? What will I say to her when we meet? Will she identify me? Would I be able to identify her?’

Apurv’s thoughts were interrupted by Shantanu’s voice, “Hey dude, checkout these IT chicks. They are super hot. See the one in black. Come on! The girls’ hostel has arrived. There is no need to waste time now, otherwise we won’t get any girls.”

“Hey man, if I come along, who will look after our luggage?” said Apurv, and nestled tightly on the bench.

“I am single and ready to mingle...” sang Shantanu before getting lost in the herd.

After some time, Apurv could not resist searching for Radhika. He got up and started roaming at the station, going through the magazines at the book-stalls while keeping an eye out for Radhika.

“Let’s have a cup of coffee. It’s quite cold and we maybe able to see Apurv also by taking a round of the station,” Sophia suggested to Radhika after settling down.

Radhika replied, “You are such a darling. Let’s go.”

Apurv was emerging from the coffee shop. Radhika saw Apurv. Their eyes met. Radhika and Apurv stood looking at each other for a split second. *The world* stopped there and then *the world* moved on forward. She went passed him, chatting with Sophia, while Apurv walked briskly towards his compartment.

Like a bolt from the blue, Radhika drew up to exclaim, “Hey Sophia!! Didn’t he look like Apurv? No, it can’t be. That guy was looking much fairer than Apurv looks in his snaps.”

Apurv also stood stunned with the coffee cup in his hand. She certainly looked like Radhika for what he remembered

seeing in her snaps. But why didn't she show any signs of recognition?

"ATTENTION PLEASE! TRAIN NO. 8452 DOWN 'TAPASWINI EXPRESS' IS ARRIVING AT PLATFORM NUMBER ONE!"

The cacophony reverberated throughout the station. People were seen rushing by and many hopped into their compartments. Soon '*Tapaswini Express*' chugged out of sight.

"Mine would be the window seat," said Radhika and jumped on to the seat beside the window.

"Yeah, you enjoy the window seat. I am going to sleep. Really tired after all these days of exams and then shopping and packing and stuff..." Tanu uttered, while pulling on a blanket and covering her face under it.

"Goodnight" said Radhika while stuffing the earphones of her I-pod into her ears. She closed her eyes and nestled down on her berth, thinking where the hell could Apurv be? She dozed off to sleep.

A short while after midnight, Apurv, in the hope of meeting her somewhere, decided to go and search for her. He went to S – 8, only to find that all the girls had gone off to sleep. A disheartened Apurv turned to go back to his coach when he saw Radhika cuddled up inside her blanket. This time he was not mistaken. She had to be Radhika only. He stood there and stared at her absentmindedly. He observed she had the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen. Her lips looked as if God had worked with his chisel to make them as perfect and attractive as possible. Even from a distance and the dim light, he could make out that her cheeks were soft and lovely. All in all, she was literally flawless. Strands of hair kept flowing over her beautiful face under the rotating fan. She looked fairylike with her glowing fair skin. Soft, pink lips shone as light fell on them. Simple yet stylish she looked!

Her smile was simply gorgeous. He felt that he was the luckiest person on this planet to be able to witness such beauty!

“STOP HIM...” shouted a guy in his twenties while chasing another, who seemed to be in the first year. Apurv, startled by this commotion, went forward to see what had happened. He found out on making enquiries that a brawl had occurred when some first-year students had passed comments on a third year student’s girlfriend.

He noticed Shantanu lingering at a distance. He went to him to find out more information as he always had more details. He came to know that the girl was the same senior whom Shantanu had been eyeing as a fresher. But the typical Shantanu description ran something like this – *“Ye itna dheela – dheela kapda pehanke aati he, mera kya-kya hil jata hai.”*

Apurv said, “When she wears tight, yours also get tight. She won’t leave you in peace.”

“Even I want to get stuck into her.”

Tired and indifferent to all such college brawls, Apurv went to sleep.

“Rourkela has arrived. We would be reaching Ranchi within a few hours. So get up and be ready,” Shantanu announced to Apurv, who was getting ready to have breakfast.

“Hey, let’s go and see what the others are doing,” said Apurv and Shantanu got up to meet their other friends who were travelling in different coaches.

“Hi Megha! Nice to see you here,” said Apurv on confronting Megha, who was his school friend and had taken admission in the electronics and telecommunication discipline. They started chatting and discussing their college life.

In this same coach, Radhika and Sophia had come to meet their friends. They passed by Megha, Apurv and Shantanu who were engaged in discussing their exams. “Hey! You know the girl who just passed by is our Miss Fresher?”



“Oh! That’s Radhika,” responded Apurv.

When Radhika and Sophia returned again after meeting their so-called friends (so-called because they had ostensibly gone to locate their prey), Apurv stopped Radhika, “Hi! Don’t you recognise me?” So saying, he stretched out his hand towards her for a handshake.

“No, I wasn’t sure actually!” replied Radhika, looking into Apurv’s eyes and taking his hand in hers. She then turned towards Megha and wished her.

“How come you two know each other?” exclaimed Megha.

“Just like that!” retorted Apurv.

Megha smiled mischievously.

“I think we should better move towards our coach now,” Sophia interrupted.

“Yeah, let’s go. ’Bye Apurv,” said Radhika before following Sophia.

“What were you doing? Why were you constantly staring at him?” Sophia pinched her.

“I was just analysing him whether he is eligible or not for becoming my boyfriend,” winked Radhika.

“So, this one is final.”

“Yeah, final,” giggled Radhika.

Apurv’s eyes followed her retreating back until she got out of sight. He turned back and found both Shantanu and Megha staring at him.

“So let me put it again; how do you know her? Just friends or...?” Megha asked tauntingly.

“We are just Orkut friends, you know,” said Apurv and left.

He rushed towards Radhika’s coach to catch a final glimpse of her. On the way, he bumped into SRC, “Hey Apurv, check out this new version of *Need for Speed...Most Wanted*.”

After staying with SRC for a few minutes, Apurv started getting restless. "Listen man, I will catch you later; have to go now," said Apurv and went ahead to search for someone who seemed his destiny at that moment. And...

Finally, he caught sight of her buying a soft toy doll. He stood mesmerised, watching her giggle and play with it.

The announcements inside the train could be heard and that brought him to his senses. Radhika had left and only the toy-seller stood with his collection at the platform. He hurried as fast as he could, with a similar soft toy hanging from his suitcase.

Making her way through the crowd at Hatia Station, Radhika followed Tanu and her father towards the car, her subconscious mind still looking out for Apurv.

Unfortunately, Apurv found his chauffeur in no time and his car was soon zooming out of the station. Sitting snugly on the back seat of the sedan, his thoughts flew back to his first-ever meeting with Radhika.

On reaching home his mother greeted him, and then all he could think was the beautiful aroma of home-cooked food.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So, are you serious about getting committed for life with this guy Apurv?" Payal asked.

"That's not my idea of love or of getting committed. I mean right now I just like him. I barely know him, though partly it is good because who knows what the future holds? Anyways, I don't believe in love at first sight. How can anybody fall in love just like that? The few things I know about him make me like him, but I want to know more about him and if I do get into some kind of a relationship, I would prefer that we grow into a couple who falls in love with each other only after knowing what they are best and worst at. Only then will they have everlasting love and respect for each other. I don't want it

to be a compulsive bond where, just because we are having an affair, we are found to be together and to love each other.

And finally get married. Love for me doesn't mean that we will grow thinking we have to get married no matter what happens. I want that by the time we get married, even if I am given the chance to choose anybody without giving it a second thought, I could go for him only. It should be like the evolution of our love over time and it should strengthen with each passing moment. We should grow into such individuals that marriage is our ultimate goal. See, maybe right now he is suitable for becoming my boyfriend but when I think of getting married, I might have some different criteria. We should not fall in love, only rise in it."

"Ohh man, fabulous speech! That means whoever seeks your love will have to struggle a lifetime to prove himself. That's why people say love at first sight is the greatest time-saver," chuckled Payal.

"My most dreaded nightmare is to have an unsuccessful marriage, after seeing Mummy and Daddy fight for these many years. I know that once you get married to the wrong person, you have to suffer, make your children's life hell, your career cannot prosper, and family and household problems come as free gift coupons to a failed relationship. And that's the last thing I would want in my life. Anyways, how's it going on between you and Nitin?" Radhika asked with an intense expression.

"You know *na* after my parents came to know about it, life became hell. I don't know where our relation is heading and frankly speaking, right now I need to concentrate on my engineering entrance exam as already I have lost a year," Payal said with a grim smile.

Radhika patted her on her shoulder.

\* \* \* \* \*

Apurv spent his days enjoying the Christmas vacation and the functions organised at the club. He met his friends and they went out for a picnic. Days flew past and New Year eve approached. He missed the night outs and the long chats with Radhika. He spent his days online waiting for Radhika to buzz him some time on G-talk. Alas, the day never came.

He knew he was missing her – missing her much more than he had missed anyone ever before in his whole life. He spent his nights remembering the first ever meeting with Radhika. He wondered if it was mere attraction or more than that to leave such a powerful impact? Her face acquiring different expressions on different moments came flashing to his mind. He simply wasn't able to get her off his mind even for a split second.

Then New Year eve arrived. It was 31st of December and the whole town was brightly lit, with youngsters merrymaking and getting ready to embrace the New Year eve. Apurv got lost in it.

The New Year came and went followed by the date for returning back to the college. The day arrived for Apurv to pack up and leave.

“Apurv, let's go son. You will miss the train. Why are you always late?” shouted his father at Apurv's lack of punctuality.

“Late is a relative word, Dad! Don't worry, we won't be late,” he replied enthusiastically.

He was amused at his Dad's behaviour. He had been living alone for the past two years and had neither missed any exam nor any train nor any appointment, so why was his Dad creating much ado over nothing?

## **Common Sense is Not that Common**

“Daddy, Tanu isn’t coming. The train will arrive shortly and yet there is no sign of her. She has got my tickets and she is not picking up my calls even. I am going to look for her.” said Radhika and dived into the swirling crowd.

Immediately she was obstructed by a collision. It took her a few minutes to realise where she was. Surprisingly she found herself standing in front of Apurv!

“Hey, I didn’t know you were also going on this date! Which coach are you in?” an elated Apurv asked.

“Errrr...I don’t know actually. Tanu has got our tickets. And she isn’t here yet. Ahhh, here she comes! See you later,” replied Radhika before rushing towards Tanu.

“Where have you been...?” she asked.

“Leave me. You didn’t tell me Apurv is even leaving on the same day,” winked Tanu in mock anger.

“It’s just a coincidence...”

“You never know. Maybe there are other obscure coincidences in your destiny today,” said Tanu and pinched Radhika.

She wasn’t wrong at all. They entered their respective berths and found that Apurv was in the next compartment.

Radhika started jumping and asked Tanu, “Do you think he will come here to talk to me? Let’s keep a place here so that when he comes, we can have a long chat.” No sooner had she uttered these words when a middle-aged man came and sat down beside them, throwing water over all her hopes.

Radhika frantically reached for her laptop and started watching a movie, getting Tanu engrossed in it too.

When Apurv passed through their coach, he found Radhika busy with her laptop. Not wanting to disturb her, he went along with his friend without uttering a single word but wondering what could be present in that damn laptop to hold Radhika so spellbound!

Somehow he managed to break apart from his group and uncertain what to do next, he began walking through Radhika's coach in the hope of catching her eye.

It wasn't that Radhika was unaware of what was happening. She was keeping a track of how many times Apurv passed. She couldn't help remarking, "Hey...isn't Apurv's behaviour reminding you of that Backstreet Boy's song, *'Baby one more time...'*?" Their laughter was cut short by a single word, "Hi..." from Apurv.

Radhika looked into his eyes and said "Hi So, how was your stay at home?"

"It was cool. What about yours?"

"It got over even before I was able to realise it."

"See you then, 'bye," Apurv said with a warm smile.

Radhika smiled back. "Did you see that?" Radhika turned towards Tanu.

"What?" inquired Tanu.

"He has got such cute dimples. I didn't know this before. Anyways, it's such a waste. Such a coincidence that we are going on the same day. Our seats are so close and yet he isn't taking advantage of it. All he had to ask me was about the holidays. When chatting on internet, he had so much to say! Why can't he talk in person? Anyways, it's quite late; let's sleep now."

Saying this, an agitated Radhika climbed on to her berth and dozed off to sleep.

Apurv this time resolved to talk properly to Radhika. So when he went to the coach, all his hopes were dashed to find her

fast asleep. Filled with remorse, he went back to his berth, pondering why he had not talked for long. 'It's my fault only,' he thought.

When he climbed on to his berth, his mood lifted when he noticed that he could see Radhika's face from there. But his joy was shortlived as the blanket of the passenger in the upper berth slipped, concealing Radhika's face.

"Great, just this was left! What luck!" grumbled Apurv, before closing his eyes.

This was how they reached Bhubaneswar. On reaching their college, both of them went to their respective classes and when evening came, they waited anxiously to chat with each other. More importantly, both wanted to hear the opinion of the other about themselves.

But ALAS! Upon reaching their hostels, they came to know that the internet facility wouldn't be available for the next week.

With a positive attitude, Apurv came online through GPRS. However, it was later he realised that Radhika would not be online as she did not have the GPRS facility. Saddened by the thought that he wouldn't be able to chat with her, he sat there idly flipping through the pages of a novel.

<DING>

Radhika said, "Hi!"

Apurv replied, "Hello...nice to c u online!"

Radhika continued: "Wi-Fi service has started here. What about your hostel?"

Apurv answered, "Nope; still out of order! By the way, u wanted 2 meet me, n now that v have met finally, how do u find me?"

Radhika replied, "No, it wasn't that I wanted to meet. It's just that chatting doesn't give a complete picture of the person.

Anyways, u r very cute, friendly, well behaved, sweet like always...”

Apurv was pleased. “Thanx...”

We could have talked, but we didn’t even bother! Lol!

Radhika said, “Yeah! But I was thinking to wave to u, but u were the first 1, anyway, I was busy adoring my crushes...”

Apurv said, “Cool! So huz ur latest crush?”

Radhika said, “There are several...hard to name all of them at a time.”

Apurv replied, “U not interested in love’n stuff?”

Radhika said, “Actually I believe in love but don’t like stupidity. I mean, like in colleges, everybody falls in love just by physical appearance and they say they are so much in love, they are so compatible and like each other’s behaviour. I mean, just after getting into this college, so many people have got committed within a single week. Do you think they would have got the time to know about each other’s behaviour and check out their compatibility and the most funny part of it is they call it ‘love’.”

Apurv said, “Okay, wasn’t that a bit too harsh?”

Radhika said, “Arav always quarrels with me that I also made my crush list based on looks. But there’s a difference, I accept them as my crush only. I don’t holler around, ‘I love them.’ Luv is much more than this.”

Arav, Radhika’s new friend, had come to know everything about her. But, Apurv would get annoyed whenever he was mentioned; the same held true when any other guy’s name was mentioned.

Radhika said, “Hey, anyways u have crush on anyone?”

Apurv replied, “No.”

Radhika said, “Okay, quite busy in study it seems.”



Apurv said, “No. By the way, u have got your concepts right...”

Radhika asked, “Which concept?”

Apurv answered, “About luv’n crush, our ideologies match quite a bit.”

Radhika asked, “Was that a compliment? Well, do you remember that we had a debate about an inter-religions marriage and u had said many things about love’n that u believe in true love. I vaguely remember what u had said...”

Apurv admitted, “Yeah, I do remember.”

Radhika said, “Okay then I said one thing that suppose if u like someone’n think u r in love’n den discover that she is not d 1, den what wud u do? I said d same thing to Arav, but he has never given a damn to my perception.

“That’s the major problem with falling in love, coz here nobody has that much time for knowing someone. They start going out and eventually get committed. After that, when they actually realise that they don’t love each other, they are trapped because everybody knows that you are committed and now you can’t back out.”

Apurv said, “See, if I propose, then there can b two alternatives – either she accepts or she doesn’t.”

Radhika asked, “If she accepts, then?”

Apurv replied, “If she accepts, then it means we both like each other. Then where is the case of discovering something later?”

Radhika said, “U discover she is not like what u thought her to be.”

Apurv said, “This is the case when she accepted. That means she likes me. Then even if I find that she is different, then also I won’t have any problem. I will adjust’n she can change too a bit according to my expectations.”

Radhika said, "If anybody proposes to me, I will warn him in advance saying 'You don't have a single idea about the real me. I keep on freaking over petty things; save yourself. Run away kind of, coz at this point of time I am not prepared for a serious relationship. I am just 18. How can I choose my life partner when I don't even know what I want from life and exactly what kind of person I would like to get married to?"

"My friends totally agree wid my idea of not tying down myself to a serious relationship now. And also coz I know that nobody has clear pic of me. Most of d people think that I m very quiet'n serious..."

Apurv asked, "Watz the real pic then?"

Radhika replied, "It's like 2 parallel railway tracks. I have got several shades and my behaviour is governed by my instantaneous mood. What I mean is that I speak a lot, but I think even more.

"I have my own conditions for relationship with a boyfriend and it's not that simple 4 me as it's 4 everyone else to accept any proposal. U know, on the very 1st day of my stay in the hostel, we had a discussion about who will make a BF, I said, 'I haven't got any problem in making a BF'n all the girls said, 'No I cant make a bf and now everybody has 1. And moreover, boyz don't reveal everything. Many things r there. Till now many people have told me that Arav is pretending to be ur friend kind of stuff. Earlier I had fights with him too, but now I know he is my friend. I should trust him'n not believe wat others say."

Apurv agreed, "Yeah, this is true."

Radhika said, "So this is d way boyz handle their jealousy?"

Apurv asked, "Who says they don't get jealous but all r open in a way."

Radhika said, "No I m just saying that boyz say they don't get jealous, it's a girls thing."

Apurv said, “Backstabbing is there. But we talk directly face to face.”

The chat went on and on. That night they chatted to their heart’s content, making up for the days they could not chat during the holidays.

PS: The results were out. Radhika didn’t flunk in any subject and she got a grade of 8.2, two points less than Apurv. Maybe she was just exaggerating (like always).

## Life is Not Divided into Semesters

February had dawned and everyone was excited about Valentine's Week. Both girls and boys were speculating on how to approach each other and everyone was enjoying the aura which prevailed in the campus.

Sophia and Radhika, not the ones to be left behind, stood on the terrace, overlooking Kings Palace 3 and enjoying the sunset and silence around them. It was short-lived as Tanu came after her class and began talking. "You know what happened today? Today it was our engineering drawing sessional. Rashmi had not completed any of her work. Sir awarded her 6 out of 10 and she swung her hair so violently that they brushed against his face. She slipped her hand over his palm, looked into his eyes, moved her curvaceous body close enough for him to smell her and seductively said, 'Sir, soooo less (marks)?' And her marks were increased to 9! Can you imagine that?"

"Radhika, your sessionals are coming up next. You can definitely take a leaf out of Rashmi's book. You are so beautiful. He will surely award you a 10!"

"Ooh! That was something," smirked Sophia.

"I am not interested in getting marks that way," Radhika responded with a look of disgust and moved away from them.

"Okay madam, let's discuss something you are interested in," sang out Sophia and Tanu in chorus.

"APURV!!"

This story made the rounds of the hostel for the next few days before dying out slowly but surely.

Valentine's week came and boys and girls started roaming in the campus dressed in their best. A bunch of boys went past a gang of giggling girls. The sales at the Archie's Gallery and other gift shops broke records, and this included the flower shops near the college campuses. Obviously the committed ones were buying for their beloveds but even those who were not, preferred not to be left behind. They hoped that they would gather enough guts to express their feelings to those they admired.

Radhika and Sophia spent a whole night searching for pictures of chocolates, red roses, teddies, wallpapers and downloaded various songs and animations to add to their collection. When they finally got tired of doing this, Radhika told Sophia, "We have got enough stuff to impress our boyfriends. Krish will definitely feel you have done your homework."

"Yeah, I wish he was here. It would have been wonderful! Why did he have to join a college so far from here? Anyways, the maximum I can do is to send him cuties on G-talk. You can also send these to Apurv. He will surely like it."

"I don't know," responded a confused Radhika. "I am not too sure whether he will like it or not. It's like, we chat a lot, and I feel he also likes me, but he has never said it explicitly, either through words or any of his actions to show that he loves me."

"Well, you can try sending it. Maybe he is waiting for you to open your cards."

"Okay, for a change I will try it. Let's see how much it helps," sighed Radhika.

"Good, then let's make a flow chart of what to do next week," added a jubilant Sophia.

Radhika posted the following flash card, over Orkut.

## SHORT LOVE STORY

There was a Blind Girl Who Hated Herself cOz Of being Blind. She Hated every1 Except her Boyfriend. 1 day d Girl said that if She can Only c the wOrld she will marry her bOyfriend One day sOme1 dOnated eyes To her & then she saw everything including her bOyfriend. Her bOyfriend asked her, "NOw that u can c, will u marry me?" The girl was shOcked when she saw her bOyfriend was alsO Blind, and she refused tO marry him. Her bOyfriend walked away with tears and said, "Just take care Of my eyes dear."

It was Rose Day. Different coloured roses were seen everywhere. Friends were giving each other yellow roses. Lovers were exchanging red roses.

It was a day when guys could easily give a yellow rose to a girl and whether she liked it not, she could not refuse it.

P.S.: Friendship is a door which can open the path for love.

An usual evening greeted Apurv.

<DING>

On his laptop.

Yes, it was Radhika!

Radhika: Hi!

Apurv: Hello Radhika...hw r u? Have not been able to talk properly.

Radhika: So, even today, r u busy with counter strike?

Apurv: No, not today. Want to talk to u. Hey! U know my family is planning to go for a South-east Asian trip this summer vacation. My father wants some friend who can come with us to Thailand as it would be more fun to go together and enjoy. Can you go with me?

"Tanu! Tanu! Listen to this. Apurv wants me to accompany him to Thailand. As if Daddy will allow me! And if Apurv is

dying this much to see white elephants, he can just go and stand in front of the mirror!” said Radhika and rolled over, laughing.

“Good one Radhs! I have even got a better one. Today, I spotted Mayank wearing an orange shirt. Due to his dark complexion it was looking as if coal fields were on fire!” Tanu added fuel to the fire of laughter.

“You win! Yours is better. Let’s get back to the important task of our life – chatting,” and they turned towards their laptops again.

Radhika: I won’t get permission from home. Anyways, thanks 4 asking.

Apurv: Okay, but do u know we have chatted 1465 lines today..?

Radhika: I contributed more!

Apurv got a file acceptance option on his chat-box. He accepted it. A rose appeared on the screen. It was followed by another, then third, fourth, fifth...and within a few minutes the whole screen was filled with all kinds of roses. New roses continued to pop on the screen.

Apurv was amazed and stunned as he had not expected to receive anything of the sort. The scrap struck some chord inside him and he felt something he had never felt before. Suddenly it hit him.

Apurv: HAPPY ROSE DAY! Oops! I missed it! That was soooo fabulous and breathtaking! Thank you!

Radhika smiled to herself. She was pleased that without even saying anything she had said a lot.

Radhika: I m pleased that you were sharp enough to make out what was that flash card meant for.

Chocolate Day followed the Rose Day and Apurv promised himself to gift Radhika cadbury *Temptation* when they met next,

while on Teddy Day, Promise Day, they exchanged wallpapers, flash cards, songs and quotations.

Apurv messaged to Radhika the next evening, but as she was busy with her engineering drawing sheets, she could not reply to him. Frustrated, he asked Radhika a few times.

Apurv: Do you want to chat with me or not?

Radhika: Can't you wait for some time?

Apurv: No, I cannot. One last time I am asking – will you chat with me or not?

Radhika: NO.

He went offline out of anger as he could not endure Radhika's negligence. Radhika waited some time for him to get online, before picking up her cell to call him. She called him again and again, but he didn't pick up. Exhausted and disappointed, as she had run out of ways to contact him, she SMSed him.

"Why did you get offline? Why aren't you coming online? It was not such a big deal to make fuss about. Reply if you wish. Goodnight. Take care."

Next day when Radhika got online, she found an offline message sent by Apurv. 'I just asked u a simple question. You could have replied to it simply. I got offline as you were not interested in talking to me. If u wanted to chat, u could have simply said YES, I would have remained online then. If u don't want to talk me, then it's absolutely fine. We won't ever talk again. Goodbye. Take cr.'

Arav: Hi, hws life going on?

Radhika: Just had a fight with Apurv. Nothing good going on.

Arav: Maybe it's a surprise. He may be planning to propose to u on Valentine's Day and he is just creating a platform now.

Radhika: Ya...in my dreams...



Arav: Okay wait. m calling u.

Radhika and Arav started talking about the ongoing in their lives. Meanwhile, Sophia buzzed on G-talk.

Sophia: Hey Radhs...*jiju* idle. What happened? Aren't u talking with him? What are you doing?

Radhika: No idea. Haven't talked to him. I am talking to Arav.

Sophia: Ohh...my dear Radhs...I wonder to whom u want 2 get committed.

Radhika: If u say so. This time I am gon'na make him reel. Let's see how he is going to face this attack.

Saying this to Sophia, Radhika buzzed Apurv.

Radhika: Hi! I am sorry for whatever happened. I accept that I want to talk to you.

Apurv: Hi! I am sorry too. Even I was missing you.

Radhika: You will be delighted to know that I have found a girl for you. She is suitable for you. Aren't you excited to know who she is?

Apurv: No, I am not interested. Why are you talking like this? Is there some problem? And by the way who asked you to search a girl for me?

Radhika: Being your good friend I thought that it's my duty kinda.

Apurv thought, 'Why is she saying like this? Does that mean she doesn't like me? Why the hell is she suggesting girls for me?' He however sent the message: But I don't go on organising a *SWAYAMVAR* saying 'who will become Radhika's boyfriend?'

Radhika: That's y u r not that good friend of mine as I am yours. Now shut up and listen. Her name is Anjali and I think u know her pretty well. U two chat a lot over Orkut. Your looks

complement each other. Both of u r fair with cute, *cute* looks and cute *cute* smile. You will be the best couple in the campus.

Apurv: Yeah, yeah! Whoz interested anyway? I am not even taking the pain to read whatever u r typing. I have to complete my practicals; will be right back in two hours. Will u wait 4 me?

Radhika: Fine. Then I will also complete my lab record. Radhika wrote her lab record and saw that two hours had passed.

Radhika: Have u completed ur lab record?

Apurv: No, still two graphs left.

Then Radhika completed all the pending chores, like arranging her cupboard and table and waited patiently for Apurv to come.

After waiting a long time, she fell asleep. Her sleep got interrupted by a squealing sound as Apurv was buzzing over G-talk. She nestled into her bed and checked the time. It was 4 o'clock in the morning.

Radhika: What took u so long?

Apurv: Actually I was writing my practical, but meanwhile playing a little bit of Counter Strike.

Radhika: I was waiting for you; tried real hard not to fall asleep while you were enjoying. Ridiculous! You could have told me that you will be playing CS. I would have gone to sleep. Even if you don't care about your time, then at least care about others. I am really upset at your behaviour. I think in your priority list, CS comes before me. Anyway, it's fine, you can enjoy your CS. I am going to sleep and from now onwards, I won't bother to remain awake for a person who can't respect others' feelings and time.

Saying this Radhika signed out.

Apurv sent several SMSes saying he was sorry and he wouldn't repeat it in future but nothing could budge Radhika.

It was a small issue but for Radhika it was a blow to her ego, as she felt she did not hold a place in Apurv's heart as Counter Strike took priority over her.

Generally, Apurv seldom apologised to anyone anywhere. Even if the mistake was his, he turned a blind eye to show he was not aware of it.

Hi...

M really sorry for all that has happened...

M really sorry 4 talking to u rudely...

M really sorry to keep u waiting for so long...

M sorry that I hurt u so much...

M very very sorry that u had to cry becoz of me..

M really very very sorry...

Feeling very sad n miserable that u were hurt...'n the things shaped up like this...

Plz Plz 4giv me...

I PROMISE NoT TO HURT U EVER AGAIN...

After reading that SMS and seeing him accept his mistake, Radhika's heart melted like an ice cube kept at 45 degrees Centigrade and none could doubt her importance in Apurv's life.

She even called her sister and friends and made them read the entire SMS.

Valentine's Day came.

Radhika pondered over what Arav had said and enthusiastically got dressed in her best attire. She walked all over the campus, hoping to run into Apurv. But contrary to her expectations, she didn't see any sign of him. She finally gave up and plonked down by the side of a tree. A bevy of girls passed by, holding flowers and gifts in their arms. She sighed and returned to her hostel. She didn't get online due to her blue mood.

Apurv sat alone beside a window and thought, 'The day has passed without any event. Why am I missing her so much? Is it friendship or something else? Why do I keep thinking about her so much. This same day arrives every year, but never before have I felt time slipping away. I want to do something about it. Why does it feel that something is missing?' These questions reverberated in his mind.

He picked up his cell and SMSed Radhika. 'HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY! See, this time, I was the first one to wish.'

Radhika gave a sad smile after reading it and muttered, 'This time I expected more than just a dry wish.'

Valentine's Day is a day to celebrate with someone special, to be able to cherish the spirit of love. Those who have fallen in love, live the day to the fullest. Even those who haven't, wish they had someone special to share this day so that they could express their feelings by becoming a part of the lovely Cupid-hit environment. Most of the youngsters without a special friend would look forlorn and lonely when passing by a beautifully decorated Archie's Gallery or a jam-packed restaurant crowded with young couples, or a temporary rose counter at the street corner, wishing if only they could be a part of it all!

Even Apurv and Radhika wished they could have been with the others to celebrate this special day.

February was the month of festivity, specially as KRITANSH, the annual Techno Management Fest of KIIT University was celebrated with fun and frolic and which drew students from all over the country. The university was decorated and stands and platforms prepared for the function. Everyone geared up for the different campus and online events and games.

Apurv was interested in 'Orionosphere', which was the online treasure hunt contest. As his chatting with Radhika had hit a low, Apurv enrolled himself in most of the events. This

way half of his days passed in participating in different events and the other half in volunteering.

Radhika called him, “Hey, what’s up? You are not online, playing CS?”

Apurv said, “Hi! Just busy in the events and volunteering.”

“CS fever hadn’t got over yet and now this Kritansh has popped in.”

“Nothing like that. So, how’s your life going? In which events are you participating?”

“A very interesting event, about which you may not have heard – roaming around and shopping!”

“That’s cool!!”

“Are you free on Sunday? In the morning I will be out for shopping, then I will go to Shivam’s birthday in CCD with my lab partners. But can we meet afterwards?”

“Cool with me. See you on Sunday! Bye.”

“Bye and best of luck for the events and be there in the open air theatre by 7 p.m.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Sophia isn’t it cool we have no time restrictions during the Fest? This way we can stay out of hostel till midnight!” Radhika yelled with excitement.

“My boyfriend doesn’t stay here, and you haven’t got one, so what’s the use? Let’s rush to the basketball court. The DJ has already arrived and open dance will start any moment,” Sophia tapped on Radhika’s shoulder.

“No, I will wait here for Apurv. Will join you after an hour,” Radhika said in an impatient tone.

In the boys’ hostel, all the guys were getting dressed and a long queue had formed in front of the mirror.

“Get ready fast, fucker! It’s time to rock at the party,” Shantanu shouted.

“I will be ready by the time you clean your ass,” Sarthak shot back.

The boys were excited to feel the air of their own college as they were not allowed to roam around much after normal class hours.

“Let’s go, otherwise the others will choose all the girls and we won’t get anyone to dance with. Now, what is going to be our stoppage?” someone questioned the others.

“If you want quantity, we can go to the orchestra, but if you want quality, we can go to the DJ,” said Rohit, taking a puff from his cigarette.

“It will be great to watch the bouncing boobs. Let’s go for the DJ. Quantity will soon pour in!” a skinny guy spoke out.

The boys left King’s Palace V and got lost in the crowd.

Apurv said to Shantanu, “Will join you later. Have fun!”

“Okay bro! See you there.”

Upon reaching the open-air theatre, Apurv found Radhika already waiting for him. Her moonlit face looked awesome and he noticed strands of hair brush her cheeks as her snowy arms played with them. She was wearing a necklace of strange beads and broad white-coloured bangles to complement her white skirt and frilled top.

Apurv smiled and thought ‘Oh, she’s looking hot, dressed up like this for me.’ Then he threw a glance over himself, ‘Oh man, why is my timing always this terrible and dressing too?’

“You are late,” Radhika said, displaying a mysterious smile.

“You are early, and by the way, you are looking pretty.”

“That I always do. Thanks, but you are not going to get away just like this. Where’s my chocolate? Don’t you remember your promise?”

“Yeah, let’s go to the canteen right now and I will treat you to a chocolate ice-cream. We can have chocolate later.”

They took a round of the campus and chatted for a while. Then Apurv asked for permission to leave.

“You could stay a bit longer. We can sit in the open-air theatre and...err...chat,” Radhika suggested.

“It is not the right place and the right time. See you later. Take care,” Apurv bid her goodbye and left.

Radhika watched him leave and thought, ‘Did I dress up in my most beautiful dress and accessories only for 15 minutes of rendezvous?’

Sophia came and asked, “Why did he leave so early?”

Radhika replied gloomily, “He said it was not the proper place and left.”

“Yeah, I guess he knows only one proper place and that’s his room and for you it’s yours with the internet connecting you both.”

Apurv was lost in his thoughts on his way back, ‘Better not let unwanted rumours spread here. Most of the guys haven’t got any work to do and an empty mind is equivalent to a demon’s house. We can meet sometimes later and talk for a longer time.’ He joined his fellow batchmates at the DJ event and started dancing and jumping.

“Even if Apurv is not here, we can sit in OAT” Radhika suggested as they settled down in the lowermost row to make their usual girl-to-girl talk.

“Why are boys always such jerks? While the girls’ behaviour is uniform, for instance, any girl on this earth would love to receive cards, chocolate or flowers, but with guys you can never know what they would like or do the next moment. They are so reserved that even after knowing them for years, you cannot tell with certainty what’s going on in their minds. Girls normally blurt out their life stories in few hours of acquaintance, but the guys keep all their secrets intact. Their reactions never make any sense. Suppose I show appreciation for Navneet or say that he

was looking handsome in that outfit, you will take it as a compliment, but guys would enter into a fight over such a petty issue. They first get physical and then think. Why are they such nuts? Come on, tell Sophia?”

“Radhs, boys are mental, but chill! Don’t let Apurv’s behaviour upset your evening. And yeah, about what you asked right now, boys and girls are different and possess contrary behaviours so that together they can complement each other and protect and support. Most importantly, they are like the lock and key, where without the key, the lock is useless and vice versa. You will realise it for yourself and then may even come up with a better simile when you enter into a real relationship.”

“Yeah, that’s right! But, I think I am not ready and mature enough for handling this kind of a relationship right now and I don’t want to carry this burden. I just want to have fun and study. Only when I decide to settle down, I will think of a serious kind of relationship.”

She was interrupted.

“Radhika, I have something to say.” It was Piyush, Radhika’s classmate and he used to sit beside her during their classes. He had been acting a bit strange since the past few days.

“Piyush, I am not in a good mood right now. Do you mind if we talk later?” Radhika replied, looking at him.

“No, what I have to say can’t wait. Since, the past many days I have been trying to build up my guts, so I won’t go today without saying it. Radhika, I LOVE YOU. You are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen – you blossom like a flower when you smile.”

“Hey, stop kidding! We are just friends. Get over it and concentrate on your studies, instead of thinking of such crap.”

“You don’t believe me? Okay, wait here, I am coming in five minutes. Don’t go away,” he said, while disappearing into the dark.



Shortly he came running back, “You think I was trying to fool you? Here, I have something to prove my love for you.”

Radhika and Sophia looked seriously, wondering what he could have brought!

Then he handed a flower to Radhika, on seeing which, Radhika and Sophia burst into loud laughter.

Piyush looked at them in bewilderment!

“Hey I barely know you and you think a flower which you have just picked up from the college garden would prove your love to me?” Radhika screamed.

Piyush was about to say something but Radhika snapped, “I have already got a boyfriend. You get it? I am committed.” This was her patent and well-practiced dialogue which she used for avoiding a guy who did not interest her.

But Piyush didn’t give in so easily. He said, “I don’t have any problem with you having a boyfriend. That’s not a big deal.”

“That’s something amusing, but I do have a problem,” Radhika said, forcing a smile.

“Okay, fine. You don’t want me in your life but at least accept this flower. What’s wrong in this? Come on, take it,” pleaded Piyush.

Radhika looked away.

Piyush threw the flower on the ground and crushed it ruthlessly beneath his shoe. Giving a disgusted look at Radhika, he said, “This flower has died because of you,” and left.

Sophia jumped up towards Radhika, “That was something melodramatic and the final touch came when he crushed the flower under his feet and his dialogue, oh my! That guy has got guts, proposing in the open-air theatre so openly. I don’t know how you could have curbed your laughter.”

“Seriously, it was funny...” laughed Radhika. “See, as I said, boys are strange creatures whose behaviour you can never predict or justify. I never gave this guy any sign. I don’t know from where he got this idea and said ‘I love you’ so easily. Imagine the guy, to whom I am giving encouragement since the past three months can’t talk to me in public.”

“But why did he go and get a flower? Since he said that flowers fall when you smile, then why could he not just ask you to smile and pick up the flowers that would have fallen?” winked Sophia.

“Oh yaaaa,” Radhika slapped Sophia on her back.

“Don’t ride the high horse. I just said it for lightning the mood.”

Laughing and joking, they walked towards their hostel.

## Spell-casting

Radhika geared up for her birthday which fell on 22nd of February. She got herself beautiful dresses to wear on different occasions on the same day – one for celebrating in the hostel, one for going to class, one for going out with Apurv and her friends and thus her list followed. It was the outcome of a three-month-long shopping spree.

Apurv also grabbed the opportunity to spend time with her, talk face to face and come closer personally. Since long he had been looking forward to this special day. They needed some time as they hadn't met after KRITANSH.

It was a Sunday and Apurv donned his best outfit. He came out of his room quietly, lest he disturb his sleeping roommates. He wondered what to gift her! Then he decided to buy her whatever she wished to have. He started for Top'n Town, where Radhika and all her friends were supposed to assemble.

Sophia, Tanu and Radhika had been planning for days to make everything perfect on that day. Their aim was to bring Apurv and Radhika close together so that they could spend time without any hassles. They had even planned where they would sit inside the auto, who would stay with whom, in which formation they would sit in the restaurant, what to say to Apurv, how to leave him and Radhika alone for some time, which malls to visit, what to wear that day, and all other minute details which could facilitate their coming closer. They reached Top'n Town and saw Apurv coming from the other end of the road.

Radhika was wearing black long skirt, brown top with a stole over it and carrying a pink umbrella.

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, RADHIKA! You are looking gorgeous!!”  
Apurv wished Radhika.

“Thank you! We both are in black,” replied Radhika, happy that her first magic spell had been cast successfully.

While they approached the auto stand, Tanu pushed Radhika towards Apurv, saying “Stop talking to Arav. Why are you wasting time? See Apurv is walking alone; you won’t get this kind of an opportunity again.”

They then went to the temple and the malls as planned.

Tanu and Sophia said to Apurv, “Hey Apurv, could you please take Radhs away for some time. We have to buy presents for her and we don’t want to do so in her presence.”

They nudged Radhika and whispered in her ear, “Try to make the best of it.”

Apurv took Radhika to a shop and they separated from the group. Radhika kept on talking, pouring out everything, right from her childhood mischiefs, school-life incidents like scoldings from her teacher, fun with friends and the various prizes she received, how she bunked her classes and ran away from school to watch movies, to stories about her family members including even her second cousins. Apurv kept on listening enthusiastically to her long and vivid stories. He enjoyed these so much that he even forgot for how long they had been chatting. They passed many friends as it was a Sunday and many had come to visit the Forum Mart. Satyam, romance, winked at him as if to convey ‘I’ve caught you red-handed, roaming around with a beauty. Carry on. See you at the hostel, sort of attitude.

They joined the group and went to Pantaloons. Radhika was checking out a metallic printed top. Apurv noticed her admiring another frilled-top and told her, “Take it. It’s from me.”

Radhika replied, “No, it’s too costly.”

Apurv continued, "This is your first birthday with me and I want it to be memorable. Have it. Happy birthday once again."

She took it and thought that *he is so into me*.

Only Apurv and Radhika stayed together and talked to their heart's content as Tanu and Sophia would often vanish somewhere, leaving them alone, as per their well chalked-out plan!

Radhika's successful spell on him and the day passed with loads of fun. At the end of the day, both were left feeling satisfied at being able to have come to know each other better.

Apurv thought that night, 'How nice it felt to spend the day with her! Why doesn't her birthday come every day? Oh man, I miss her. Her voice was so great...like rock music...er...*naa*, it was so melodious and it felt as though each word was dipped in honey. I have never been so close to any other girl and it is really amusing and amazing. I could never imagine that it would be so great to be with someone. The way she fiddled with her hair and such a beautiful face was revealed every time she put the strands of hair behind her ears. I am being drawn towards her the way I have never been to anybody in my life. Wish the day could have lasted longer.'

Radhika thought, 'Thank God, everything went according to the plan. It was my best birthday ever. I have got such helpful friends. Without them, this day wouldn't have been possible. I hope Apurv has understood me. But why is it that every time I have to chalk out a plan to make our meeting successful? Why does it have to be me to initiate the meetings? Why do I always need to show my interest in him by sending songs and wallpapers? He does send me some but I don't think it is done purposely. The more I know him, the more I get lost. He is so different from the other guys. Anyways, although we are just chatting friends and we have met only a few times, he has

gifted me such an expensive T-shirt! It would have taken half of his monthly allowance. That definitely means something.'

After an hour-long analysis, Radhika felt contented. She went to show her T-shirt to all the others girls and after seeing it, they all exclaimed in unison, "Oh...my God!! He spent the whole day with you, talked with you the whole night and has gifted you an expensive dress! Now we will start proclaiming in the whole block that you have got a boyfriend!"

"But he does not speak anything to me directly, nor does he show his interest in me," sighed Radhika.

In KP4 the scene was spectacularly different. News had already spread that Apurv and Radhika were seeing each other and Apurv had gifted her an expensive dress. Credit was given to Shantanu who seemed to know all the details.

"Hey guys, you know Apurv was seen out with Radhika today at Forum Mart. Things are brewing up somewhere!" commented Satyam.

"Hey Apurv, I heard that you and Radhika went out together?" Sumit asked Apurv the following day.

"Of course, I did. What's the big deal?" Apurv replied casually.

Rumours began to float and became quite exaggerated as they spread from one mouth to another.

As the girls to boys ratio is normally less in engineering colleges, every good-looking girl attracts several boys to her and Radhika's style and 'Miss Fresher' title drew many to her. Gossip abounds when boys and girls start going around together and this was much more as it was the case of who had more admirers. Moreover when every new girl gets booked, the other guys start wondering what would be their chances if all the beautiful girls got hooked. And this was confirmed when Radhika saw a new testimonial in Apurv's Orkut account from a girl named Nimisha. Radhika could not contain her curiosity to

check their mail and discovered that they chatted a lot. She thought, 'Is there any possibility of something going on between them? At least from the scraps and testimonials their intimacy becomes quite apparent.' The next day, Radhika pestered Apurv to tell her about his crushes before her arrival on the scene.

Radhika: It can't be true that despite your good looks, you never had a crush on anybody or nobody had a crush on you. There must be some stories related to your female friends.

Apurv: As to who had a crush on me, I don't have any idea. But about me, I have known many girls and some of them were beautiful but none of them could qualify as my crush or secret love. But tell me, why are you stuck on this question?

Radhika: Shut up! You did not have a crush even on any of your teachers? Come on! Every boy gets attracted to someone among the many teachers.

Apurv: No, not on teachers. My first crush occurred when I was in kindergarten.

Radhika: Here you go. And somebody from our college? Now you don't expect me to believe that a guy who had a crush when he was in KG won't be having any crush in college?

Apurv: Well if u have to select from our college, whom will u select?

Radhika: I was the one who asked first. Well, I'm not the one to select coz I'm not going to propose to anyone. It's just that I need to select from proposals I get. Actually the situation here in our college is very funny. People conclude that they love the girl because they have seen her once in the campus. This is so even when they know only her name. And what is ironical is the girl isn't aware of it. Once the boys' hostel as also some in the girls' hostel learn that a particular guy likes a certain girl, word goes around. I consider this as disrespect to the girl you like. It need not be love coz love doesn't happen that easily,

hence all the more reason to respect the name and feelings of the girl. Now, will you please answer my question?

Apurv: Yeah, Samayara from IT is good...

She was a film actress in the local film industry and wonder why the hell she was studying engineering? No guy was able to get her and no girl was able to hide her desire to be like the actress. Radhika became really jealous on hearing this but gradually calmed herself and typed.

Radhika: Yeah, many ETC boyz were crazy about her. During exams, she used to sit beside my lab partner and others were so jealous of him.

Apurv: Yeah, well, if it's about selection from KIIT then u are also gud coz I haven't talked so much wid any other girl here.

Radhika smiled and thought, 'He won't give up ever. He won't accept his liking for me directly.'

Radhika: So, have you talked with many girls?

Apurv: So you are pulling my leg. Now it's ur turn, u tell.

Radhika: My crush story is very tragic.

Apurv: Okay.

Radhika: Many of my crushes turned out to be *chinki party*.

Apurv: Okay.

Apurv wanted to take this discussion to a higher level because it was the first time they were talking directly about his feelings for her, but luck was not by his side as the net got disconnected.

Radhika thought, 'Couldn't have been a worse timing than this.' As the net remained disconnected, she went to sleep.

The weather was cloudy and the surroundings looked marvellous that morning as it had rained the previous night. Apurv sent an SMS to Radhika, describing the aura of dawn breaking on the city and the fact that his Mom was arriving



and that this he could not communicate as the internet got disconnected.

The train finally arrived and his Mom got down.

“How are you, Apurv? Nice to see you after such a long break. Oh, u have got slimmer. Isn’t the hostel food good?” All mothers on earth find their children slim even if they are the size of Yakuzuna (WWF).

“Well, I am more or less fine; just not feeling good. I don’t feel like doing anything; my mood is off,” replied Apurv a bit dully.

“Don’t worry son. Now that I have arrived, you will be fine.”

“Yeah, I sure will. Let’s go to a hotel and settle down. You must be tired.”

Apurv and his Mom left for the hotel while he narrated everything about his hostel, college life, friends, a bit about Radhika and even his monthly expenditures.

“Apurv, you gifted Radhika such an expensive dress. Is she is just your friend or a ‘special’ friend?” asked Mom, giving him a curious smile.

“Well Mom, she is ‘special’ out of all my other friends,” Apurv replied.

The talk continued with Apurv telling her about Radhika’s birthday party, Kritansh, night-outs, birthday bashes, etc.

Apurv stayed with his Mom in the hotel for three days.

Radhika became bored and felt bad that she could not talk with him. She generally chatted with many guys, but in his absence, she didn’t go online even. She passed the days watching romantic movies and sleeping.

Seeing her in that condition, Megha commented jokingly, “Your mother-in-law has come and taken her son away. What will happen after your marriage if this is the condition now?”

As for Radhika, after watching romantic movies, she missed him all the more and sent him a message to the effect over Orkut. As she felt lonely, she finally went online.

Shail was online; he was a third-year student who had been pursuing her since the previous six months. He buzzed her and started flirting with her, asking her to meet him the next day. A few minutes later, Arav called, "Hello Radhs, what's up?"

Radhika became irritated and replied, "Nothing. Just that a senior is flirting and proclaiming his love for me. Sometimes I feel that instead of concentrating over Apurv, I ought to give him a thought. He has been consistent in his affection for me. He has worked hard to find information on my likes and dislikes; he is a topper in his branch with a CGPA of 9.5; he is handsome and crazy about me and above all, he is bold in expressing his interest in me. And on the other side is this Apurv, who has not even thought about me in the past three days."

Arav replied casually, "Yeah, he is good. Go for him."

"What do you mean by go for him? Huh? You are not a good friend because you are encouraging me to change my decision. I like Apurv and that's final. If I will make anybody a boyfriend in this college it would be him and I will wait for him, no matter how much time he takes," snapped Radhika.

"Good Radhs, at least you have settled on one guy. Keep it up," Arav replied.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sessionals arrived and with Apurv's poor drawing skills, he found it hard to complete his practical files and assignments, especially on the basic manufacturing system. As the assignment submission deadline drew close, most of his time was spent in preparing for practical exams. As a result, they got less time to chat with each other.

Apurv: Missed you a lot Radhika. It was very difficult not to talk to you for so many days. The nights seemed longer without you to chat with.

Radhika: Me too! Anyways, how's your preparation going on? Are your files ready? I guess u need to submit it in a week.

Apurv: Having great trouble drawing the figures, I dunno why we have to do these even.

As Radhika was very good in art and painting, it was a small job for her. She thought, 'It won't hurt much to do a small thing for him and it may apparently lead to a few more meetings to show that I care for him.'

Radhika: You can give it to me. I will do it in an hour. I have done Arav's also.

Apurv: No, thank you. I have written much of it; I will be able to do it.

Apurv refused, thinking that BMS (basic manufacturing system) file was tough and he could not expect her to make it for him. Anyways, it was a task for him and Radhika must be having her own sessional records to work over. So he had to do it himself.

But it was so difficult and as so less time remained for the sessionals, he gave her the last section to write.

"Hey Apurv, take it on Wednesday. I will complete it after my English sessionals," Radhika promised after taking the file from Apurv.

It was a Wednesday. Apurv thought, 'Hope her presentation went off well. Why should we not go today to a coffee shop and spend some time together? I missed her so much. It will be a small treat for her in return. Moreover, drawing BMS diagrams is not child's play.'

He shot her an SMS as follows: 'Hey, best of luck for your presentation. Thanks for the BMS diagram. By the way, we can

go to CCD this evening after classes as I have got some work in that area.'

Radhika's presentation got over and she saw his message.

She thought, 'Is he alright? I hope he is not out of his mind. He has never asked me out before.'

She called him to confirm the validity of the SMS.

"It is final. We re meeting at 5 p.m. sharp, before going to CCD," Apurv reconfirmed later.

The clock struck 5 and Apurv reached Gate No.2. Radhika stood waiting with a group of ETC girls.

He thought amusingly, 'Why the hell is she standing with bodyguards? I am not supposed to be taking all of them.'

But she moved forward to the group as soon as he approached her.

Apurv said, "Hi Radhika!"

"You know my presentation was marvellous and even my sessionals went great! Ma'am was impressed!" Radhika said, looking relaxed.

"Hey, that's great! See, I knew it. That's why I am taking you for a treat. By the way, thank you so much for writing the file for me. Those machine diagrams...Oh my God! They were really complicated. Thanks again, you are so cute!"

"You are welcome," said Radhika, blushing a bit.

The general talk continued at CCD but soon they shifted to their topic of mutual interest. "You know what? Many committed guys here have asked their girlfriends to wear decent dresses, like long *kurtis* 'n all and avoid talking to other guys. See, isn't it funny that such guys ask their girlfriends to be friendly with their buddies initially and if they are not, then they allege, 'You are not smart enough' and later, they themselves start feeling jealous if their girlfriends become too friendly with their buddies," smirked Radhika.

“I think such guys don’t have confidence in themselves. They fear that some other guy can woo them and take them away,” Apurv said, extending the menu card to her.

“No, you only do that...” Radhika said, but changed the topic to say wearily, “really tired.”

“Okay, I will be back in a few minutes,” Apurv said and placed an order for the most expensive drink available, like any other guy would do when dining out with the girl of his dreams for the first time.

After his return, their talk continued. Radhika said, “But you are always so casual in your behaviour that no girl would like to have you as a boyfriend. If a boy doesn’t restrict his girlfriend from being over-friendly with other guys, then the girl takes that to mean that he doesn’t care for her. Take a hypothetical situation in which I am your girlfriend and not many people know about our relationship. If I get upset with you due to some reason and start going out with another boy who is your friend, and that guy comes and reports about it to you and you don’t say anything to me about it, then I will feel that you don’t love me at all. If you were to slap me over it, then it would hurt, but would mean that you are in love with me.”

“You have just seen one side of me. I can be possessive. See, I won’t let you go anywhere alone, so just go straight to your classes. Don’t talk to any other guy except me. There shouldn’t be any other guy’s number in your cell. You will go out with me only and return home. Blah! Blah! But you know what? I won’t ever say such stuff because I also know and you also know that if you are my girlfriend, you yourself will not like to go out with anybody else. Such a situation wouldn’t arise where I would have to tell you to stop. And talking about the hypothetical situation, I would have scolded you and told you that I was hurt. Later I would have hugged you and told you that I am sorry for the things I said and that it would never happen again.

I would never allow anybody to say anything about you behind your back.”

“You know you really are sweet,” Radhika said, giving an impressed look.

“Thank you.”

Their drinks arrived but when the bill came, he discovered that they had been charged extra for cream and chocolate syrup. Apurv had to face the financial crunch. Like any other girl caught in such a situation, Radhika started panicking. Apurv calmed her and said he had got his ATM card and went out, saying, “Wait for me.”

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In his absence, Radhika checked out the bill and saw the total amounted to Rs 700.

On their way back, she chuckled, “When I gave you the opportunity of saving money, you did not take it.”

Apurv said nothing because in his mind he was thinking, ‘She did Arav’s BMS diagrams.’ Finally, he asked her, “Who is more close to you, me or Arav?”

“Why do you ask that?” she queried casually.

“Can’t you answer a simple question which has a one word answer?” Apurv shot back, losing his patience.

Radhika, who was walking in front of him, turned back, came close to him and said, “You, idiot. Don’t you know this that you have to ask?” Again she started walking ahead of him.

Elated by her response, Apurv looked up at the sky, brushed his hair with his fingers, and felt satisfied with life for a few moments. He then ran ahead to catch up with Radhika.

When Radhika entered her hostel premises, she heard Apurv hailing her from behind. She turned and saw that Apurv had climbed the wall of Queen’s Castle.

“If anyone sees you like this, I don’t know what will happen. This will be the last day of my stay in this hostel.”

“You can consider this as our first date,” Apurv chuckled and then jumped back.

Radhika jumped in triumph and felt elated as she walked back inside.

\* \* \* \* \*

College was closed due to Holi, but nobody had gone home as the students wanted to play Holi in their hostel. Although guys and girls had different plans for playing Holi, all bought colours to paint the other’s face.

Surav said excitedly to Pritish, who was doing mechanical engineering, “This time, after playing in the mud, we will hang a pot of sweet curd from the third floor of the hostel. Let’s see who will bring it down.”

Some even planned pouring buckets of coloured water on sleeping people, but their plan was foiled as Pandey (the warden) totally banned entry of colours inside the hostel.

The outcome of the whole thing was – “PANDEY M\*d\*\*chod”, which was engraved in bold letters and bright colours on the hostel’s overhead water tank. It was visible from a distance of at least half a kilometre away.

It took some time for Apurv to realise what Radhika meant to him, because since childhood, he had a large friend circle comprising both girls and boys. So he thought that she too was one of his good friends. But Radhika, who had grown up essentially in female company, felt that if a guy talked to her often it meant that he was interested in her. Moreover, the guys she knew strengthened her notion. So from the very start, she considered Apurv to be the guy to qualify as her boyfriend. But Apurv realised this rather late and when the realisation dawned upon him, he had no doubt that he was in love – she was the

only girl who was the most important person in his life and that he could afford to lose everybody but not her.

Though Radhika liked him, she wanted to know more about him, like their compatibility, likes and dislikes, expectations from each other and whether they would be able to fulfil them or not, before taking their relationship to the next level. The frequency of their meetings kept on increasing and became the talk of their college. Troubled by uneasy questions from their batchmates, “What’s going on with Apurv?” Radhika decided to clarify from Apurv what exactly their relationship meant to him.

But she wasn’t able to do so as Apurv had faced a bad day and he kept on talking about that. Frustrated at not being able to ask personally, she went online and started typing over G-talk.

Radhika: U don’t know I had so many things 2 tell u 2day, but was not able 2 say. Dere is lot more 2 say but I don’t know how 2 begin. It’s that I miss u a lot, when u r not there. I think about u d whole day, then wait 4 u 2 get online. And when u r dere I don’t want u 2 go. It’s really tough saying bye 2 u. When you are wid me, it seems like time is moving very fast ’n I want 2 say dose things to u, but it’s hard coming directly 2 d point when we r together. Moreover, u interrupt in between and I forget what I wanted to tell you, even though u always say why don’t u say things directly. I mean everything can’t b said directly. But m trying now just 4 u. U know, why I go offline as soon as u say bye? It’s coz I find it hard to see you go offline in front of me. That’s why I feel it’s better I leave first.

I wanted to say dose things before but every time, time got over and I could not say anything that I wanted. I want 2 say things when we met but now it’s not possible, as our exams are approaching. You once asked who is more closer to me – you or Arav? I want to ask why did you think of just Arav? Even if you had increased your range, the answer would have remained the same.



You have known me from, from, a long time now. If I were to take into account the duration 4 which we chat, den u must have got the sum idea about me. I mean, my nature n behaviour. Well, do u think that if some guy were to tell me that put ur pic, den I wud put it?

You gave me your number, that was fine. Then u asked me to call and I said nothing but rang you back. I never sent any SMS in my whole life till now 'n now I am expert in doing dat. These may seem minor issues 2 u but it's not so 4 me. Okay putting pic is not a big issue but u asked me 2 send my pic. I didn't say anything. I sent it.

U asked me out 2 CCD. Going anywhere alone with a guy, I mean just one guy, do u think it's that simple or it's no big deal? Well let me tell if you don't know already, this is how it has been with me and I haven't gone out alone with any1 here ever before.

These things were about me. If I were 2 consider your side, den also what I get is this. Correct me wherever I m wrong. You won't chat dis much wid any other girl; won't ask any other girl 2 put her picture ova G-talk daily; would u remember the names of every girl's best friends even if told once; won't care so much 4 any other girl; least I don't 4 any other guy; maybe am wrong or maybe am rite. You are the one who has to take the final decision.

It's not about just you or me; it's about *we*, and it's not about just missing you. It's much more than that. Hope u realise. Whenever u get online give a missed call on my cell. Finally I m done with most of d things I wanted 2 say 'n which I remember at the moment, I have told you I could have missed several things. But I think these are enough, 'n it's not just a cute mess.

I must remind u, am very serious 'n mature too. Cute 'n sweet are just 1 side.

So u can take this message a little seriously.

C, I have told these things without you asking for them.

So if u have anything 2 say den why wait 4 me 2 ask.

I have no questions, but there maybe something u may want 2 tell.

Just ponder over it and it's a request. I request rarely, so take it seriously...

She was satisfied with her genius. She had said everything without saying anything.

## **2 hour later**

Apurv is online.

Apurv: I have no words to say anything rite now. I can't find words, I dunno what to reply. I m not able to type anything. I dunno, am spellbound, rather speechless after reading the message. Ya whatever you wrote is true.

Radhika: Okay I just wanted 2 know that only.

Apurv: Yeah, you are rite, I didn't do for any other gal. M not able to...do u mind if I reply properly later? Believe me I want to reply but just can't do it rite now. What reply do u expect?

Radhika got totally pissed off.

Radhika: This isn't a damn question-answer session. I haven't asked you anything so y are u bothering to reply anything at all.

Apurv: I got hell lot of a scolding from parents, so actually plzzz understand. I beg u to understand. I m not intentionally speaking rubbish, but nothing else is coming out of my mouth.

Radhika: See, I think you were not ready for it. Let's talk about something else.

Apurv: Get back to normal, u needn't ask. Every action has a reaction. I will definitely reply. You have poured your heart

out 'n u wrote so much so seriously 'n am not replying anything. Seriously, I dunno what are u thinking? U must be thinking I'm stupid, but really, I'm not able to produce any word right now and hey, I too miss you a lot when you are not around.

He had said that he would reply to her provocative message and he guessed that she wanted a proposal. He was overjoyed that his doubt on whether Radhika loved him or not had been cleared by that message. The message touched him, touched him directly. 'She is so true; whatever she says is everything that's real.'

*It's not like that I can't live without her, it's just I don't want to...*

## To Do or Not to Do!

“Hurry Apurv, hurry! You don’t want a burning barbecue inside you. It’s gonna be 5 p.m.”

Apurv checked himself again, ‘Well, I am looking fine. Good clothes, flower, ring and nice smell...perfect! The maiden will be bowled over. To propose is a big thing; a big thing for a nerd like me. Slaps and sandals weren’t my desire, though I won’t mind them from a hot tie like Radhika. They say you should experience everything once in your life. Not only slaps and sandals, but even boobs and booties are a subset of everything (from whatever Maths I can remember from school days). And I have no intention of missing those.

My friends say that style and attitude I have already received through my mother’s umbilical cord, but impression and perfection needed preparation. Preparation is passé. Plan is the ‘in’ thing I planned. Every chick is a girl and every girl needs a story. These *Homo sapiens* with XX chromosomes find it interesting to utter “oohs” and “aahs” to one and all, making it a pain in the ass for the set of XYs.

Here goes mine:

“You rule over me, from dusk to dawn,

you are not only my dream; you are the reality.

If I say the truth, you are the one I need.

You are the one because of whom my world is so beautiful.

You are the one I thrive for,

You are the one bestowed on me from heaven.

You are the one for whom I have got the courage to do anything,

You are the one I LOVE....”

Logic *ho na ho*, length *honi chahiye!*”

Apurv looked at Radhika without blinking his eyes and thought, ‘I know she won’t have anything to say after this. It could not be that every day a guy like me could be uttering these heart-melting words while bent on his knees. Within a few seconds, she will also get down and hug me...then...rr...I can kiss her. Yeah, coz a kiss will be a perfect way to end this day.’

“Will you love me forever, or love me till the time this college ends, or love me for this semester?”

Apurv’s amusing thoughts were flushed at Radhika’s not-so-impressed and not-so-overwhelmed tone.

“Love you forever,” Apurv said, thinking this hell of a girl is not that easy to get through.

“Radhs, I have had crushes, but the way I feel for you, I have never felt for anyone like this before. I have had many friends of the opposite sex but you are different from them. I know I can spend my life with you coz you understand me – you are a friend, advisor, well-wisher, supporter, motivator and I won’t ever regret passing my life with you.” He started recounting these things in order to win over Radhika, but in the process realised that he really meant them.

“If I had been at your place, I wouldn’t have used ‘I love you’. Agreed that whatever we have is more than friendship, but below the demarcation line of love, I have heard this line 100 times since my adolescence – how are you different from those guys?”

“Yeah, so here it goes – *the questionnaire* – which all girls as hot as Radhika have inbuilt in them since the day they were born. They have even got some predefined answers and it would not matter how reasonable your answer is if it does not match theirs.”

Apurv was getting pissed off.

“Why are you asking such questions from me? I mean, you know me well and you like me. I know this. Courtesy you only, I think, whatever I feel for you there is no word other than ‘love’ that defines it better, so I admit it.”

“You barely know me. Whatever you know is materialistic. How can you ask for commitment? By the way, what do you expect from me if we commit ourselves to each other?”

Apurv checked her, top to bottom, bottom to top. ‘She must have gone back after the classes and changed because how else can she justify this make-up? She knew something is going to happen today.

So she has got an answer – ‘yes’ or ‘no’ – whatever it may be. She has made up her mind and I will have to play who-will-become-Radhs-boyfriend game.’ He turned to Radhika to say, “I don’t expect anything. I know you are smart enough to deal with it. As far as I am concerned, I will rediscover you and I am sure you won’t disappoint me.”

“What if *you* disappoint me? Besides, how are you so sure that you love me and won’t leave me ever...”

“I will adjust. I always had concern for you. The only difference is that sometimes you came to know about it, sometimes didn’t. You remember when Pritish displayed your picture on his G-talk id, my head went round. I got him threatened by my friends to stop that nonsense.”

Radhika was overpowered by Apurv. “Shit! Now he has obliged me by rolling in this stuff. Yeah fine, I wanted to know what he feels, but that was because he never showed any interest in me. Right now he is standing in front of me talking about love and commitment. His casual behaviour always indicates that he believes in the open relationship kind stuff. Flirting, doing my assignments, BMS work, always getting a duffer to finance our outings, numerous cups of free coffee in the evening,

guys roaming around me...Is this moment the dead end to my vantage? No I can't let him win; I have one left."

"What will happen to our friendship if I say 'no' and what about my friendship with other guys if it is 'yes'?"

"Our friendship will remain as it is and I will never have any problem in future with you having friendship with other guys," Apurv replied.

"Fuck friendship, we never had it...and a 'no' will account for a few more days of futile flirting and experimentation through persuasion. For a 'yes', if I give you the opportunity to leave me, only then can you be with them," was his reply. Apurv added with the brightest smile he ever had in his whole life, "Do you love me?" "No." "Would you like to love me?" "Yeah, but I am not promising it." "Can I be your boyfriend?" A longer pause to go without interruption. "Radhs?"

"YES," Radhika said.

Apurv hugged her tightly. She pushed him back, "You said nothing will change between us if we commit ourselves, then what is this?"

"That's fine sweetheart. We are gon'na take it slowly," Apurv stretched out his hands. He thought, 'I have just proposed to her. At least, I can expect her hand.'

He got it and started kissing it.

He was sure girls loved this and it was one of the best ways to win her body, with the mind and heart already won. It sent shivers down her spine and he knew she was enjoying it, right from her top of the vertebral column to the tip, southwards.

Radhika was perplexed by his conflicting statements and was visibly bewildered.

'I want him. I love the way he looks at me; I am getting sensuous joy from his touch, but this can't be love. A relationship needs to be nurtured and needs time. How can a

guy's behaviour and feelings change in a split second? Before the proposal, we were a metre apart and all of a sudden he has become so passionate about me! There is no compulsion. Why am I being a part of his game instead of resisting? I hate being actively involved...'

Radhika continued holding his hands reluctantly, though.

"In a single moment the word 'sweetheart' has replaced 'Radhika.' Now, this is the identity I will have to live with."

They hugged. They hugged till Apurv's watch chimed 6 o'clock. Radhika picked up the roses cautiously and kept them in her bag. She was impressed. Girls love receiving proposals, whether they accept them or reject. It is not same thing to introspect; it is a status symbol which they can flaunt. The more the proposals, the babe-*ier* and boot-*ier* she is.

As a law of Nature and by virtue of female character, by 9 p.m., all the girls knew that he had become committed and turned their attention to other boys.

Apurv was troubled at the gossip of the day which continued near water-coolers, in toilets and everywhere.

"Gone are the days of negative balance. Now, Apurv has to be charged up at all times."

Humans are social animals and different social animals have different emotions.

"FUCK man!! This bastard Apurv has fucked Radhika... now, who will we fuck? Another curvy babe gone off the list."

Reply to the above: "We will go gay. Single hotties are an endangered species and in our college, on the verge of extinction."

The discussion was concluded with a confession by a mechanical engineer, "With no ray of hope in our senior batches, even the three in ours have directly been imported from Africa's *jungle*."



### Facebook status in a relationship

Unable to grasp the transition of his marital status so soon, Apurv was lost in his own thoughts. 'Now, Radhika is mine. Officially mine. No one can trouble her. Fucking seniors, she is not their muse. I will beat the hell out of them, bastards, lurking around her. And then those IT and CSE motherfuckers flirting 24/7 with her. That has to stop. She is too innocent; she doesn't know what guys actually are. They pretend to be her friends and behind her back, enjoy the status of being called *her friend*. All are after her curves. Enough is enough. Now I won't allow anyone to talk crap about her.'

Between the swirling thoughts, he carelessly dialled Radhika, not to talk to her, not to talk to a girl even, but to talk to a girl who was his girlfriend, whom he owned now.

"Hi...love."

"Hi..."

"How do you feel after getting committed?"

No reply for five minutes, while Apurv waited patiently on the other end of the line.

"Sweety, are you there? What are you doing?"

Again a pause. But a reply came. "Nothing baby, just chatting..."

"With whom? You aren't replying...?"

"Just Shivam, Siddharth, Nishant, Ayan, Sujit, some [hellohotchicks@gmail.com](mailto:hellohotchicks@gmail.com), Kaushal, Gaurav, Anwar, Ashish..."

"Are, are you really committed?" asked Apurv shocked.

Radhika interrupted, "Yeah, of course!"

"Then what is this? Before my proposal, you chatted only with me, waited long hours for me and for the past one month used the Friends Forever 2008 id in which I was the only guy listed but now when I call you, you are not even paying attention to me?"

“Having you in my life doesn’t mean losing the others. You are a guy; you don’t enjoy the perks of being single, but I do. I can’t afford losing them...”

“I understand what’s the problem. You are feeling uncomfortable to call me your boyfriend rather than just a good friend.”

“Yeah!”

“And the problem is not something related to your fondness for me or me not being the right choice. So, it means you like me.”

“I like others too.”

“But you can’t have everyone as your boyfriend, to whom you can pour out your heart or trust you. You have to select the best.”

“Hey don’t love me, I am bad. I didn’t have the intention to hurt you, but everything seems freaking wrong.”

“You are hurting me now. You are the sweetest girl I have ever met. You will become alright after some time and will gradually feel that your choice is right and what you have done is right for u. Are you happy that I proposed??”

“I need time to think over it.”

“That’s all I wanted to hear. And that was the main thing I wanted to know. Thanks for giving me the confidence that I wasn’t wrong in liking and proposing to you. I was feeling so depressed so far and very miserable too just thinking that you are not happy. But now thanks for your assurance. I am on cloud nine as you didn’t refuse me. I will live up to your expectations. Apurv is fortunate to have Radhs as a girlfriend and as a companion. Thanks for accepting me. You can take as much time you want to get accustomed to the feeling and I am sure you won’t regret your decision. I will be always there whenever you need me. Have you got anything else to say??”

“Can I go to a movie tomorrow with Kabir?”

*You are among the luckiest persons in this world if you have someone whose success you can cherish more than yours.....*

$$1 + 1 = 1$$

Amit was relieving himself in the cubical next to Apurv's.

Curiosity is not something that can be held for long. He spat out, "You and Radhika are just friends or...?"

Apurv wanted to say, 'Even I am not sure' but said, "Yes, of course, she is my girlfriend,"

"Incredibly handsome, well-built, cute dimples, calm, patient, humble, understanding, intelligent, straightforward, smart, damn caring, but still down to earth. And the quality I like most is his readiness to listen cause I speak a lot and he listens a lot. He is a real gem – clear example of how a person should be – well behaved and well spoken, blessed with innovative ideas. Not to miss this point, it's hard 2 find a person like him – quite trustworthy and a person you can look upon..." Radhika blinked wearily to Sophia and Tanu.

"Then what's the bloody damn problem?" was all they could ask.

"I miss my single life, how tacky! Everybody is calling me *bhabhi*. I love this part of the relationship when I am with Apurv, but hate it's impact like hell on other parts. Having mini parties every second day courtesy some (or other) guy, making 'intelligent' guys teach and cheat during exams, getting *not-so*-intelligent guys to lift luggage at the station, to making the crush list of the most eligible guys in the campus..."

The last phone call revealed the same to Apurv on the first day after he had proposed.

Tanu had her own explanations, "All that you have been up to, have you ever thought what impact it must have on Apurv?"

Next day, Cafe Coffee Day.

Radhika burst out crying. She hugged Apurv, "I love you too. Sorry for my ridiculous behaviour. This is for you."

*Better late than never.*

A hand-drawn picture of a guy and a gal holding hands and the most melodious words Apurv had ever seen.

*I know I have hurt you a lot in the past few days. I am sorry but there's a reason for my behaviour. It's not easy for me to trust anyone. I am scared. That's nothing to do with you; it's just my problem.*

*If possible, forgive me...*

*But I still want to be with you and trust you. I may get confused sometimes or I may act ridiculously but on all such occasions, I want you to cherish the belief that I am yours.*

*At times I may not be able to accept you, but I am still yours and I want you to remember this.*

*Remember me as you want to.*

*Remember me as you wish me to be.*

*Remember me as yours and only yours.*

Apurv read it thrice.

"This is so cute. You have spilled your heart in it. I will name it a 'piece of a loving heart'."

After some days, they became like any other normal couple. Normal means: proving the seven equations of  $1+1=1$ .

Seven proofs to the equation  $1+1=1$  are:

- Speed of walking together is directly proportional to the distance from college while going out and inversely proportional while coming in.
- In a given area, the low population density implies hands together and lips and cheeks.
- Orkut status = Committed.
- Facebook status = In a relationship.
- First testimonial from him/her – a scrapbook full of *jaan/jaanu*.
- If a movie is a polynomial equation, the variables always are ‘me’ and ‘you’.
- Desktop wallpaper = “C:\my pictures\my.sweetheart.jpg”
- Classes bunked. Lectures in CCD, Barista and Mayfair.
- Every statistical data has the median as him/her, means as him/her and mode, definitely him/her.

Even our mythologies give evidence of the stupidities people commit when in love. Lord Rama wandered around, expressing his love to trees, branches and leaves on seeing Sita for the very first time. Evidently time does not have much effect on LOVE, whether it is *satyug* or *kalyug*. If LOVE is there, then obstacles are bound to be there.

Ravana in this case was Rohit. Apurv said to Radhika over the phone, “I can’t hear your voice clearly.”

Radhika spoke out at her highest pitch, “You deaf! Go and die’ cause I m not going to burst my veins out if you can’t listen properly.” She was furious. A helpless Apurv gazed at what was happening in his room.

A few minutes earlier Rohit had entered the room. While changing clothes, he had hit the play button. He started dancing to ‘*Sutta, mujhe sutta na mila....*’ He began to strip tease like a

movie hero of the 1930s when the characters moved in a slow motion. Finally, he climbed over the bed in a *saving the world* pose wearing 'only' his green G-string. Nude dancing took over.

Fifteen days left for exams in the engineering college hostel where the students were of a different kind. A few blessed with superior intellectual status were so engrossed in their studies that it seemed they were eating books, sleeping books, walking books, talking books, books, books and only books, but they were few and far between in this category.

Soon Apurv's room was converted into a strip club, where seven strippers began dancing with their clothes off, chanting the worst slangs ever, with mother-fuckers and sister-fuckers qualifying for the lowest category.

"*Raat bhar thoka me, thak ke gir gaya...*" the song carried on with everyone dancing to its tune.

Radhika called out, "Hello, are you there or shall I hang up?"

"Wait, I am coming out of the room," Apurv said, trying to make his way through the crowd. But, Rohit stopped him, saying, "Take a video...man!"

Apurv snatched his hand out, "Yeah, yeah, taking, taking..." He escaped from the room.

"Radhs, sweetheart? Radhs, Radhs, Radhs..." Three beeps followed in a row and the line got disconnected.

It was not only Apurv who confronted such situations.

Another day.

"Where are you honey? It has been five minutes and your lab work must be over."

"Just trying to find my sandals. Will be there before you blink, baby!"

Radhika flinched, the cell phone slipping out of her palm.

Shashank was offering her a sandal, which was swinging in his hands.

Handling a drug-addict was no less tricky than dodging a room-partner having the ability of a possible stripper. But, they both survived.

At the end of the day, they were in each other's arms.

"Fuck man! This bitch of a Dean doesn't seem to have any work to do," Apurv swore.

"What happened? Why are you so pissed with him?"

"After his recruitment as the new Dean, lights have been fitted at every nook and corner and bushes cleared from each and every nook and cranny."

"But, why are you worried?" smirked Radhika. "What did you want to do?"

"It's not about doing something. I want some solitude with you and not get distracted. I want to concentrate only on what you say, and have only your mesmerising face to look at."

"Anyways, our college is not that bad because when you look around, you wonder which college has got these many benches which act as a platform for couples to get closer."

"Some day we will go for a long walk on the beautiful streets of Athens."

"In your dreams..." Radhika interrupted, giggling.

"Instead of being concerned about placements and bringing leading companies, the Dean's mind is engaged in formulating anti-couple policies. Anyways, at the most, couples like us can either hug or kiss; no more than that. He should realise that if the campus is made couple-friendly, nobody would have the urge to find other sites for making out."

"Oh, really? How brilliant your logic is! I am fortunate to be with such a great philosopher," Radhika scoffed.

They were distracted by Dev, with Nishi chasing him to make him wear his sandals.

Dev sang back.

*“Chappal choti hai pairon me aati nahi,  
Mehbooba moti hai, bahon me aati nahi.”*

(Sandals are too small to fit my feet, my sweetheart is too fat to accommodate in my arms.)

The few people who were around heard him, burst out laughing. Even Radhika smiled and said, “They are one of their kind. On the one hand he cracks jokes on her and on the other, he loves her passionately.”

Their relationship was said to be doing fine except for a few disagreements.

Apurv’s G-talk remained quite active daily.

<DING>

File transfer. Yes/No

<DING>

Apurv accepted the file.

File transfer. Yes/No.

He accepted the second...and the third and the fourth. Within a few hours, his Google Talk Receive File was full of pictures, videos, wallpapers and romantic songs. This continued for more than a week during which period he was amazed, delighted and yet a bit irritated.

“You can send such stuff later. Since you have started sending these, we haven’t got time to give attention to our lives. You never ask how I am and ignore my questions. I want to know about you...”

“Oh, that’s not important,” Radhika replied.

“For the past one week, you haven’t even said ‘I love you’ once. Then what’s the use of sending loads of pictures saying the same?”



“I spent four months collecting all those for you, so that when we get committed, you would feel the same as I have felt on seeing these pictures. I hoped you would feel as connected to me as I have felt while downloading them. But, I find these things mean nothing to you.”

Apurv had no reply to it. So, the exchange of wallpapers, songs, love quotes continued till Radhika fell short of them. Finally Apurv was relieved, but he had no inkling of what was coming. The next day after class, “So, what have you got for me?” asked an enthusiastic and anticipation-filled Radhika’s voice.

“Whatever you want honey, I can get it for you.”

“I don’t mean gifts.”

“Then?”

“I mean wallpapers, songs, quotes. You did not save anything for me?”

“Give me a day. I will remain awake the whole night and collect as much as I can.”

Apurv placed his arms around her shoulders.

“It doesn’t matter,” Radhika’s expression turned pale. She continued shoving his hands away, “You never loved me; you never thought about me before we got together. No romantic picture to remind you of me. I think I was not on your mind when listening to romantic songs.” She broke down, sobbing uncontrollably.

“Radhs, it’s not like that. Why are you taking it otherwise? No guy does this kind of stuff. I found them really sweet. Before getting committed, I never thought that you would love these. We never visit such sites. Sweetheart, I appreciate your efforts. Try to understand, we, boys are different. Even if I never thought of these, that doesn’t mean I didn’t love you. I love you very much. The past is over; don’t cling to it. If you want me to do these for you, I will happily do them for you,” Apurv said.

‘What the hell, what kind of marshmallow am I stuck into? How could I imagine that all this had to be prearranged before proposing to you,’ he thought. ‘Welcome to this world,’ he however consoled himself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Quite like an orientation ceremony, Apurv replaced his much beloved Porche Carrera GT on his Orkut profile with a picture of a rose kept against the backdrop of a violin.

“*Jaan*, how’s my pic?” he asked her.

“Its great! Especially the rose...”

“What shall I wear tomorrow?”

“Purple.”

‘Fine...purple...as you say ma’am,’ Apurv thought, ‘purple?’

“Wow! It sounds great!”

“Thanks ma’am.”

“Say it again and again.”

“Ma’am, ma’am, ma’am, ma’am, ma’am...”

“Have to say something.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“It felt great to be in your arms. Very secure. Now, whenever I close my eyes, I can feel you near me. To admit frankly, I didn’t want to leave at that moment. I wanted to stay there with you in your arms, safe and secure and loved by you forever.”

“It felt great to hold you in my arms. I will always be there to keep you safe and protected you against all evils in my arms.”

“Thanks for being there.”

“I am always there for you.”

“APURV in continuously on phone since entering into commitment.” Amit smiled. “Come on, show your face to us. It’s either you are with Radhika or on the phone, talking to her.

Do you even know what's going on in the hostel? Now it's time you joined us!"

It was a strike; actually to say 'again a strike' would be more appropriate. Even though their batch may not be remembered in KIIT for the numerous 10 pointers and erudite scholars, it was sure to be remembered for the frequency of strikes in the first year itself.

#### **1<sup>st</sup> strike, October**

Usually, in colleges, it's seldom happens that the first year freshers get scrambled by their great grandfathers, i.e. the 4<sup>th</sup> year veterans but it happened with this batch in this college. It all started with a mere conflict near Atmaram, the coffee and smoke hub, which involved a single first-year and a single fourth-year student. As no one in an engineering college remains single for long, it ended up with the fourth-year student chasing all the first-year students right into their hostel.

The first-year student united everyone, angry at being beaten. A brawl normally would lead to an adrenaline rush rather than unity. Owing to their experience of four years, the seniors eventually got the upper hand and came armed with hockey sticks, chains, knives and baseball bats. How long could have the first-year students survived? They received the thrashing and fled for their lives. A strike was called to protest against the atrocities committed on the first-year students. It was the time of Diwali, a valid reason to go home. The first-and-fourth year students decided to bury the hatchet and went home. Ten days' unofficial leave was declared but the fight continued inside the trains in which the two categories were travelling.

### 2<sup>nd</sup> strike, November

Despite food not good and with no swimming pool, wi-fi, no entry time, no geysers. All that was needed by ten students was wi-fi internet.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> strike, January

Regarding the permission to first-year girls to go out, the girls in blue could go out. Some boys even showed support by wearing blue after the break.

### 4<sup>th</sup> strike, February

All the female boarders boycotted the hostel, reason being no extension of entry time to 11 p.m., no food, no wi-fi speed, no MBA coaching centre near the campus, no city transportation available, no removal of dress code, blah, blah, blah...

The strike was called off after removal of the dress code and increase in entry time introduced till 10 p.m.

Four major strikes were held in a row and all were successful.

Minor strikes followed: like no water: strike!

No current: strike!

Wan'na go home: strike!

This time chilli chicken pieces were excavated in chilli *paneer* by Kings Palace V veggie scientists. It led to two days, 18 hours, 38 minutes and God knows how many seconds of separation for Apurv from Radhika.

Finally, when they met, they had coffee from a single cup. Radhika said, "Have I shown you this video before? It's so romantic..."

Apurv smiled. Radhika's look quizzed him. He was ready with an explanation.

“Will you ask the same question after five years of our marriage? Even if you do, I will reply the same I did a week before, ‘No, baby, show it to me’.” Radhika smiled at her own mistake. ‘Why doesn’t she apply the same principle to kissing,’ Apurv thought.

“Hi Apurv, how’s your preparation going on....” waved Nimisha, entering the canteen.

“Hey Nim, what are you doing here in the canteen? I thought you must be battling with books.”

“No, nothing like that. Anyways, if you want, we can go back home together.”

“I would have loved to, but I am going with Radhs.”

“Okay, see you then.”

“Bye.” Radhika threw her a scornful look. Nimisha went to the counter, “One Manchurian roll, please.”

“Give her, one ‘MAN’churian roll. She needs one at least,” Radhika said from behind. Everyone in the canteen burst out laughing.

“Oh! That was mean,” Apurv smirked, leaning against the wall and taking Radhika’s hand in his.

Radhika started swinging slowly and murmured, keeping her voice low and her eyes fixed on the ground, “I just don’t like her the way she talks to you, the way she looks at you. I just hate her...despo bitch.”

“But see, I shooed her away. I only love you baby,” Apurv affirmed. Then it struck her that the most important question of all was still due. “Why do you love me?”

“I don’t require reasons to love you. I mean, I just love you.”

“Isn’t there something special in me which you don’t find in other girls?”

“Everything is special about you, sweetheart, but my love for you is unconditional.”

“What the hell!”

“See it from my point of view. If there is no reason for being with you, then there can’t be anything which can make me leave you either.”

“Don’t give this nonsense to me.”

Girls always have a weird reason for something or the other and they always do need one.

“If you just simply want me to appreciate your beauty and say you are a goddess and the others are your peasants...”

Radhika turned around and started walking away from Apurv. She had wanted him to say that, but not the way he did it. Apurv ran behind her trying his best, “You are very sensible, you think very deeply and your decisions, which are the output of your thoughts, are cent per cent right in everything. Your confidence in the decisions you take – I like that a lot. You are very thoughtful about your career and studies; your attachment and love for your family and respect for uncle are very great. They reflect your strong value system, your caring persona. Radhika, you care for me a lot and that’s very special. Your way of expressing love by sending songs, wallpapers and videos is so cute, and so is your *adayein* (expression). Your trust in me is admirable and the best thing is your love for me. There are so many things I like about you and everything can’t be expressed in words. I like everything which is associated with you and what I just said is only a fraction of all that you are. You are the best in everything. You are one in a million because among the million I fell for you.”

She turned back and hugged him with her hypnotic smile.

‘This sprinting after her and quick thought building was worth it,’ Apurv said to himself and hugged her in return.

“I have something for you,” said Radhika, taking out a small cylindrical metal box.

A red transparent wrapping paper enclosing a shining coloured paper with small red hearts was spread on it. Ribbons, glitter and thermocole balls flew all around. Apurv pulled the ribbon and discovered a second layer of packing to reveal cute handmade roses. On it was written: “THIS IS FOR YOU, LOVE.”

His love flowed unconditionally for Radhika as he removed the wrapping. ‘I have never seen such beautiful wrapping in my life. Only a girl can do that; no, only my girl can do that. She loves me so much. She has wrapped the gift so beautifully with her own hands, just for me. I am so lucky to have found her.’

Removing the beautiful roses and hearts, a blue little box popped out. It was a Rado wristwatch.

“Wow! Radhika! Thanks! I so love you! I love it. I love you,” Apurv said, giving a thank-you hug which was heartily welcomed.

Exams flew by in between. With studies relegated to the background and the romance fever at peak, both of them slept at four in the morning after talking over the phone. Finally, they met. With Radhika in his arms, Apurv wished that dusk would delay its arrival.

*Give love = get love = that's the perfect equation, but if you don't get it, don't stop giving it 'coz life is not chemistry.*

## Attraction is Love or What?

“Can I kiss you?”

‘What is she thinking? Why isn’t she saying anything,’ he wondered.

‘He has never asked me specifically as to what was on his mind,’ she thought and asked, “Where?”

‘As if she is so innocent. If it was for cheeks and hands, there cannot be any question for permission,’ his mind held the obvious answer.

“Cheeks.”

“Okay, fine.”

Apurv kissed Radhika on the cheek but not very far from her lips. It was longer than the usual and harder even. Apurv’s lips were firmly pressed on her cheek. Both were gratified. An instinctive thought crossed Radhika’s mind, ‘Why isn’t he moving back?’

But Apurv didn’t have any intention to do so. His lips swiftly left her cheek as he now wanted to explore her lips. Apurv’s lips were pressed hard on Radhika’s and an out-of-the-world feeling lifted their senses as well as their spirits. When it ended, it took some time for them to recover from its effect.

Radhika paused for a thought. When she finally came out with some suitable words to utter, Apurv bent down and took out a packet from his bag. Radhika unwrapped it. It was a little red box. Radhika flipped it open.

“A ring.”



Apurv took it from her and slipped her ring finger into it, saying, "The nerve of this finger goes directly to your heart." He kissed her hand.

"How do you know? Guys are not supposed to know this." she teased in order to camouflage her feelings.

"DDLJ," Apurv said seriously though it was not at all appropriate.

Radhika looked into his eyes, "I love you."

This wasn't same as the 'I love you' that any guy uses to get a girl into bed.

Apurv upped her cheeks with his hands. His lips were again concentrated on Radhika's. This time no thought crossed Radhika's mind or rather, Apurv didn't let any.

That night all they could think about was how close they had been that day. That feeling never left them, wherever they were. Apurv indulged in daydream during all his classes and Radhika was numb, feeling Apurv's lips over hers. She found herself breaking the rules.

"Was it planned or plotted in advance, answer me Apurv?" she screamed.

"That's disgusting! It was a sudden desire; I didn't have control over it."

"What the hell didn't have control?"

"Why didn't you pull yourself back?"

"I...I...I didn't realise what was happening."

"Cool down. What are you shouting at?"

"You won't understand."

"What is it that I won't understand? See, you love me. You don't want to be with any other guy and neither do I CHASE other girls; 24x7 you are on my mind. We are in love, we kissed AND NOW what's there to create such a fuss about?"

"It happened suddenly. I...I..."

“Shit man, for who else DO you want to save it for?!”

“Damn it!! It was my first kiss ever. I can’t get that non-kissed feeling again. A kiss on hands or cheeks is different; even friends can do that, but this was special,” Radhika cried softly.

Apurv thought, ‘It’s so strange about girls that first they speak nonsense and ignite the flame. They seek replies to questions with no answers. No guy can ever succeed in making them realise that whatever has already happened can’t be changed, so let’s talk about what to do now? But they won’t understand. The word “girl” is an antonym to “understanding.” If the guy shouts in anger they will use their last weapon – the deadliest one.’

“Baby don’t cry...You are crying as if I have kissed millions...

...It was my first kiss even.”

“But...” Radhika stammered.

“And I am sure if I had, even then, this would have been the best,” Radhika smiled.

Finally, Apurv succeeded in humouring Radhika.

While dropping her back to Queen’s Castle, he made an earnest request, “Radhs, it was my first kiss but your reluctance didn’t let the feeling settle in even. You need to understand my love for you. You need to learn to trust. If you aren’t comfortable, we won’t ever kiss again.”

Radhika nodded and went inside the hostel.

Apurv watched her from behind until she got out of his sight. But a line once crossed, continues getting crossed.

\* \* \* \* \*

<Ding>

Arav: Since you have committed yourself, you don’t have time for friends. Has your boyfriend barred you from talking to other guys?

Radhika: Don't bug me. You didn't call or buzz me to tell me that I am tagged as committed. Are you scared of getting hammered by my boyfriend? Or were you secretly in love with me and now are not able to face the transition and are avoiding me...LOL.

Arav: Whatever be your status, the standard of your joke will remain the same. Anywayz just buzzed u to ask where's Apurv? U r online 'n he is offline. Scenario doesn't seem that good. Is it?

Radhika: You always search for disturbances. It's nothing like that. He has got his sessional tomorrow, so I have told him to study.

Arav: Oh my God! Caring girlfriend! I wish I had someone to make me go offline and study for my sessionals. If I had a girl like you, I wouldn't have been a six pointer. But no worries. As I have no one, I can enjoy the whole night chatting, watching porn and downloading hot pictures.

Radhika: This is the reason for you being single still. You won't change. Enjoy holidays.

Another analogy of difference between girls and boys.

"Your boyfriend is so sexy and hot. He was looking handsome today!" a girl says to a normal 'girlfriend'.

With her spirits high, she replies, "That's why he has got me!" What a normal guy thinks is: 'Your girlfriend is beautiful; she is so hot and sexy.' Then what a normal guy does: "Fuck off, bastard...Eyeing my girl" and bangs the other guy down to his knees. Calling someone's girlfriend sexy is equivalent to calling him motherfucker. Such a day came soon in Apurv's life even.

Radhika and Apurv were standing beside a coffee shop at the railway station. Some classmates of Apurv stood a few feet away.

"She has got a nice ass...how did you hook her up?"

“Mind your language, fucker” shouted Apurv.

“...What will you do?” Tanmay pushed Apurv, looking at Radhika. “What have you given, which I can’t?”

BANG! A punch right across Tanmay’s face. He fell down with a bleeding nose.

“Stay away from her. Don’t want to see you in a 10-foot radius around her...” Apurv warned Tanmay.

Apurv moved towards Radhika and dragged her inside the train.

“What was the need to hit that guy?”

“You won’t understand and I don’t want to repeat what he has said.”

“Okay, don’t tell, fine! But just settle down and be cool because from tomorrow, we won’t be in each other’s company.”

“Damn the college. Why has it given a three-month long holiday? I will miss you, your smile, your words, your expressions, everything. I won’t be able to hold your hand. Whenever I do so, I feel your warmth and liking for me. It’s really heart touching and instead of giving your one hand, you put your cell aside and hold mine using both of yours. It’s a feeling of euphoria.”

“Anyways, why has Nimisha sent you such a testimonial? Don’t tell me not to react over this.”

“Who is asking? I feel great that you reacted...”

The moving train propelled them to sleep, but suddenly defying it, Radhika got up and nudged Apurv.

“I want to be at the top of this world. I want you to be there with me,” she said. “I am away from my family and friends, so that I can fulfil their expectations. I don’t know where I will be after four to five years, but I like the fact that I will not be so in life. I have many responsibilities from which I can’t run away. But, now with you there I have that support

who will say, 'I am there for you. You have the potential, go for it'."

"I love my girl. I have always been impressed by your way of prioritising your duties. Whatever you may seem externally, I know, from inside you are very, very sensitive, sweet, thoughtful, transparent, trustworthy and pure like a rose. I like everything about you – the way you talk, the way you think, the way you behave, your gestures, your confidence, sweet little acts like keeping money in your books, your sending me songs and 'miss you' pictures, going on long walks with me. I really like you the way you are..."

They looked at each other longingly with understanding flowing through their eyes. Apurv broke the silence, "It's quite late and I think you should sleep."

"What about you?" Radhika inquired.

"I will watch you sleep and listen to you breathe. Whenever you fall asleep while on a call, I never cut it, preferring to remain awake so as to hear your deep, soothing, humming breathing. It gives me a feeling of proximity, a feeling that you belong to me."

Radhika tried hard to remain awake but soon fell asleep due to the tension of exams.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What time is it?" Radhika gave a puzzled expression.

Apurv kissed her lightly on her hands, "Good morning, honey!"

"Were you awake the whole night?"

Apurv shook his head in approval, "So, still we have got five hours for talking."

It is said, that there are four forms of love:

Hand in hand.

Hand in *that*.

*That* in hand.

*That in that.*

During the next five hours, they expressed the first form of love to each other till Radhika checked her watch.

“Have we reached?” she gave a puzzled look.

“In five minutes.”

“We have to hurry and pack our stuff.”

“I have done that, so that you can watch me to your heart’s content and we can save this picture of ours till the holidays get over...”

They were lost in each other’s eyes when the train came to a halt at Kanpur station.

“Hey, Radhika, one kiss, a goodbye kiss.”

“Are you mad? This is Kanpur. Come back to your senses.”

Radhika turned back and left the compartment.

## Love is a Mirage

Being far away wasn't that tough though.

A Rs 496 voucher from Reliance had furnished them with unlimited free calls for a month, making separation bearable. Hiding in kitchen, bathroom, terrace and all other possible refuges, they came to know each other better and found being in a relationship advantageous as their love grew manifold, until she decided to have a 'light' chat with her father.

Radhika and her sister were having a sibling-to-sibling talk when her Dad entered the room with a grim face. "What's the matter??" they all asked.

"My colleague Brijesh's son has married a Muslim girl and consequently suffered social rejection, which has made him a patient of clinical depression."

"Why are you saying it as if he is guilty of committing a crime? Is it wrong to have a love marriage and all that has happened is because of having a wife belonging to a different religion?" asked Radhika.

"History proves that more divorces take place in love marriages while arranged marriages are more successful and because of this, few people go in for a love marriage."

"Dowry is a direct consequence of arranged marriages and anyways, who can claim whether people are really happy or not? The boy is forced to live with a girl due to the dowry she has brought and the girl has to bear as her parents have paid for this guy and can't afford to pay for another. So, it doesn't matter whether she is really living or dying, she cannot run away. Do you call that successful? I don't think all marriages which have

not ended in divorce qualify to being termed 'successful'. Normally, girls who opt for marrying the one they love are financially independent and thus free from external controls and constraints. Even if they do undergo any post-marital difficulties, they can move out and live peacefully. Had statistics been maintained on happy couples who care for each other and whose hearts are filled with love for each other, definitely love marriages would have won over of arranged marriages."

Radhika scored a point there.

Dad scratched his head, searching for a counter-argument.

"Yes, dowry is the only demerit, but when you marry within your own caste, compatibility is easier as both come from a similar lifestyle and thinking."

Radhika relented, "Thinking and living are associated with individuals, not their castes."

"Parental intervention is good because ephemeral love during adolescence ends up in ruining your life and career. If your cousin, Vishal, hadn't been in love since kindergarten (actually that was Class IX), he would have fared better in his Board exams and engineering exams."

Now the common belief is that if a child performs badly in anything, and later finds a boyfriend/girlfriend, then the whole blame shifts on that relationship. Even if they perform well, it is presumed that every chance of further improvement has been curbed because of their falling in love.

At this juncture, her father scored a century and her score became negligible. The debate provoked many thoughts in her mind.

She recalled what she had expected to do and compared to that, what she was doing now. 'My current situation is an okay-okay pointer as there has been no preparation for MBA entrance and no position by way of studying in college. Although Apurv is not the reason but later on when our family discovers about



our affair, they will think that love is responsible for that. Well, to some extent, he is. I have lost the habit of sitting for hours and studying, after going to college. I spent the whole of last year chatting with Apurv every night. When we just started chatting, he had some routine, like getting up early and studying, but now, both of us just talk every night and roam around the whole day. I would hate to hear the same thing being said about me which Daddy has said about Vishal,' thought Radhika.

Five thousand calls unanswered and a hundred and fifty messages un-replied over a span of five days – this is what Apurv found on his cell. "What's the matter with you? Why aren't you answering my calls? I was worried and wondered if you were alright," Apurv's agony was evident when Radhika finally picked up.

"I was studying."

"Don't kid me. Who the hell studies during holidays?"

"I do. I always did so and after being with you I lost that habit. I needed time to rediscover myself and my abilities. So I wasn't answering your calls."

"Cool down, honey, we will study when we get back."

"Studying together doesn't help much. We start talking and end up romancing. You didn't even attend any course."

"I will do web designing and java."

"When? The holiday is about to end and you were busy getting over home-sickness for the past one-and-a-half months. Every moment..."

"Why are you so tense? Everything will fall into place, don't worry."

"That's your main problem. You think that with time, everything will get alright, but you never reveal 'how.' If you

won't take any action, where the hell do you expect the results to come from?"

Radhika was correct – if you plant a cactus, you can't expect it to flower.

From studies, the focus ultimately shifted to their relationship.

"You don't love me as much as you proclaim," complained Radhika.

"Radhs, you question me about studies, that's fine. Now, don't start questioning my feelings."

"Why shouldn't I? If you were madly in love with me, you would have cared to find out what I want and expect from you. Without asking me, you always think that what you are doing for me is all that I have ever desired."

The root cause was the same to give birth to new branches of excuses but the fact remained that they all belonged to the same tree. Radhika argued, "We are not even a fun-couple. We don't go for adventure trips; we don't go out; we haven't got common friends. By being together, we are losing touch with others. As I had not anticipated a serious relationship, I now find it a burden. I always expected my soulmate to remove all unhappiness from my life. Rich, handsome, successful – you are nowhere close to that."

"How can I be successful at this age?"

"That's exactly my point. We can't predict what you are going to be. Even then, you want me to promise of being together forever. Crap!"

"If you don't know, how do you know I am gon'na be bad?"

"Coz you have done nothing special in your whole life and neither have I seen any enthusiasm in anything. You have no ambitions."

"Oh, as if you have many. Let me hear them."

“I have the ambition to own a duplex penthouse, a great job, three to four cars, a good position, authority...”

Apurv intercepted, “Your every ambition starts from ‘me’ and ends by ‘me’ while my every ambition is always ‘we’.”

Radhika was taken aback at this but soon recovered to reply harshly, “Committing a mistake once by accepting you in my life doesn’t mean I have to suffer you till I die.”

A hurt Apurv silently disconnected the call. ‘What does she actually want? I have poured my heart out. My past, present and future are all devoted to her. I love her more than anyone else in my life and she has to quarrel about small things – always studies, career. What does she think? Will I be sweeping the streets in front of our college after passing out or what?

‘I do everything to make her happy; I care about her small needs, fulfil all her wishes; love her so much and this is what I get in return.’ His heart filled with remorse.

Gradually, disconnecting of calls gave way to banging them down.

‘I miss you’, ‘I love you’, ‘Can’t live without you’, ‘Take care’ got replaced by ‘You are ruining my life’, ‘I was better alone’, ‘It’s impossible talking to you’, ‘You won’t ever understand’. Even peaceful discussions led to their claiming that they were not suitable for each other.

“We are different; our thinking differs even though we both are correct according to our own perspectives,” began Radhika.

“Please Radhs, don’t start this crap again.”

“We have a career to make and you call that crap.”

“I have never stopped you from studying.”

“But, you are coming in my way. I am an 18-year old girl but have to take care of both of us. Don’t you think that’s a bit too much for me?”

“Why do you keep blabbering the same stuff in other words? Let’s talk and come to a conclusion instead of blaming each other.”

“I have always liked you but now the part I don’t like is overshadowing the one I liked. And you are so blind to change that getting something into your head requires great mental effort. You are so easygoing, but I am not and can’t be so. I don’t want this middle-class life where I have to save money for a month before buying even a simple kitchen utensil.”

“Why do you always need to begin a fight for raising what’s in your heart? We can simply have a discussion,” Apurv was exhausted. ‘My goodness! Worried about such petty things! Even now when I do not earn, I have always given her what she wants. Even after the meagre amount I get from home, I have never let her feel the scarcity of money. After MBA, doesn’t she think I will earn enough to sustain a lavish lifestyle? What crap! Why does she think everything in the current time frame? The future has still to come and it will be great together. Hope she will understand some day,’ thought Apurv.

They quarrelled, they cried, they fought, they got hurt. Again they cried but their talks didn’t stop. They were stuck to each other though they never stopped thinking about each other. Their fights were always general until the powerful stroke of the second sessional results (which were obviously terrible), sealed their isolation from each other.

Radhika was the first one to check it. Whatever complaints a girl has, she doesn’t say it at that moment, but waits for her boy to commit some other mistake before pulling him up for the blunder.

She waited for a day or two that followed. While he, without following a single point listed in her expectations, continued sleeping late at night and wasting his day as usual without doing any work.

So, the time to break off arrived.

“I think we should split up,” Radhika said with a deep sigh!

“What? I know you are pissed off with my results. Yes, I got 7 in sessionals but I assure you, I will work and improve next time.”

“It’s not about the marks. You don’t ever get me – it’s about what you are. Your routine never changes a bit and moreover you lied to me. During your exams you stated that your papers went off very well but your results prove otherwise.”

“Maybe I miscalculated. Now, just chill and don’t mention this breakup issue again.”

Apurv knew that *this* was what Radhika really wanted but he wanted to delay it as far as possible. Somewhere within his heart, he still felt that they were inseparable.

“I didn’t get any pleasure from mentioning that Apurv. Instead of continuing with our relationship and causing pain to each other, let us just separate and lead our individual lives while concentrating on our careers. I don’t want that we should blame each other after five years if we fail to make it big. I want to remember you as the Apurv I loved and would like you to remember me as the same.”

Within a few days, the fear that the breakup was imminent began to eat at his guts. He tried each and every means of prolonging it.

“Radhika, think about it once more. Think about the way you have felt for me and would you ever be able to feel the same for somebody else? The way you wrote my name when applying *mehndi*, the way you packed the watch for me, the way you saved money for six whole months and didn’t buy a new dress so as to buy me that watch, the way you looked at me, the way you love me – will you be able to do it again for someone else?”

“Those things were not for you. They were for my boyfriend and coincidentally both are the same. 'Bye, Daddy is at home. So can't talk now.”

\* \* \* \* \*

SMS: Apurv to Radhika:

‘Say what do you want?’

You want me to change 'n then u will get back to me. That's why you are splitting up or you don't want to be with me at all?

1 miss call for 1<sup>st</sup> choice, 2 for 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Radhika knew that if Apurv did all that he promised, there wouldn't have been anything to keep her away from him. But she did not want to say this to him. She was aware that the desire *to get something back is stronger than to lose it*. Apparently, Apurv received two missed calls to convey that it was the 'end.'

He sent an SMS.

‘Please Radhika, don't do this. We can stay separate, but don't bring the word breakup. Even if everything were to get alright, it would be very difficult to get back. And even, if we do get back, memories of this breakup could easily harm our relationship again.’

But no reply came to the SMS. Radhika's eyes filled with tears. ‘I know I have broken your heart a million times today,’ she thought but prevented herself from thinking about Apurv, who kept on cropping up repeatedly in her mind.

\* \* \* \* \*

At the end of the vacations, they met at the railway station while returning to the college.

Apurv handed her a piece of paper to say he had tried his best.

Radhika was taken aback. 'It's the same picture which I had presented him! Oh, the hands are apart in this one.'

The words were painful.

**My piece of broken heart:**

*As we part ways and though I may not be the one to walk down the aisle with you, you will always hold a special place in my heart. The first time I held yours, a gorgeous girl's hand, the first time I saw you, the first time I kissed you, the first time ever I presented a ring on a beautiful girl's finger, the first time ever – all these things mean life to me. You have meant my life to me.*

*This is probably the last and the final time I will be writing to you. I want to tell you that I have loved you more than anyone else in my whole life and each moment spent with you has been like a pearl for me – so many pearls have accumulated in my heart and will remain there, making my life beautiful. I cherish every single moment when you have been a part of my life. Our future journeys are determined by heaven and we cannot edit God's own handwritten words. As we bid goodbye, I wish you have a happy life.*

*Wish you success in your future endeavours.*

*From*

*Apurv*

They stood there, watching each other with words left unsaid, with words unheard.

"If my promises are more valuable for you than my love, then you will end up losing both," tears swirled in Apurv's eyes.

"I will wait for the day when you are ready to sacrifice for me and work for a future together not with resentment, but with willingness," Radhika said, as a tear rolled down from her eyes.

*In some unknown corner of my heart he was always present.  
When I confronted today him alone, I am asking my heart again  
and again if he is the one I always waited for.*

## **She Loves Me She Loves Me Not**

Radhika's life was now confined to three junctions – college, hostel and library.

Apurv spent his days going to class, back to the hostel piled up with books, determined to fulfil his promises and win back Radhika. Depressed, he continued the routine mechanically every day, every moment thinking about her and what could she be doing and looking out for her in any crowd where she possibly could be, in the hope of catching a glimpse of her.

Leading a life when you are single is easy but staying single after getting committed is far from easy.

Radhika went online to catch Apurv, but what she received was: Die\_hard\_romeo (DHR).

DHR: Hey!

Radhika: Hi!

DHR: You know, you were the only girl I liked after coming to college. Meanwhile heard from somewhere that you have got committed.

Radhika: Fuck off!

He was one of Apurv's friend whose behaviour disgusted Radhika.

She thought, 'Guys simply don't have any morals. Apurv never understood his friends and wasted his time with these jerks who are backstabbing him. This situation would not have arisen had Apurv understood.'



In contrast, Shantanu and some others tried to heal their wounds.

Shants: Hi Radhs!

Radhika: Hi, how's Apurv?

Shants: Depressed, lonesome. Just studies whole day and go to bed. What else can I say?

Radhika: He will get a better girl than me – someone who is happy in his commitment and love. Many girls would die to be with him and what are you all for? Take him out and get him interested in life again.

Shants: Yeah, maybe if he starts going out, he will meet someone.

Shantanu and others decided to talk about this with Apurv.

“Hey, let's go. Radhika has told us to take you out. Come with us to a movie.”

Apurv saw several movies and took night outs but ended up crying during movies and missing her during the night outs.

“Love makes your life beautiful and improves you in every way. I have experienced what it feels like to be in love. But it's unfortunate the other person did not realise this. Anyway, she made me realise how nice I could be with someone. It felt great; it felt you were on top of the world. See, I am not really a great person, but for someone I could be the best guy ever and be at my best behaviour with her and do whatever she asked me to do,” Apurv pondered.

“Forget her, dude. There are lots of chicks dying to know you. You can get even sexier babes than her,” said Shantanu, whose concept of love was a bit different.

“You are right, but she has got the thing which could prod me to do anything for her.”

“You are quite young and nothing has happened. Move on with your life and studies.”

Knowing that his friends would never understand him, Apurv muttered to himself, 'I am not able to forget her. It's not that I don't try, but her impact on me is so strong that I simply can't. I know this, I feel it – it was love. I will make continuous efforts to recover my love. I will wait for the moment when we can reunite and I am sure that reunion will occur soon. However, right now the biggest question of my life is whether what has been lost will come back or not?'

\* \* \* \* \*

"Please Radhika, I am standing outside your hostel; please do come once."

"No, I won't; I am busy."

"I won't take much time. If you don't come, I will spend the whole night here."

"Okay, but not for more than five minutes."

Radhika found Apurv wearing a grey T-shirt and black track pant, unshaven (which he usually wasn't) and standing in front of the hostel gate, holding a huge packet.

He handed it to her without saying anything.

"Apuv, I can't take it."

"What will I do with this stuff? I got them only for you. If you don't want to keep them, just throw this packet away."

Apuv walked away, hoping that maybe the packet would prove his love which he wasn't able to otherwise.

Radhika stood looking in front: 'His eyes were filled with appeal and apology while questioning me to justify the separation and formality.'

Holding the red packet close to her heart, she walked slowly back to her room. When she flipped it open, she was astonished. 'He has done all this. He remembered everything – key rings with names of my siblings, several earrings, a heart-shaped locket, lots of bangles – green, red, made in pearl. Oh my God! A black

stole, exactly the same as I had asked him to get from Manali. Each and everything, big or small, whatever I had asked him to get even in my subconscious mind is here. Even, saffron, which I told him I wanted for mixing in my face pack. He has actually brought it. He has got them all.”

Radhika, who could no longer check her tears, began shedding them due to sadness and pain.

Tanu, in an attempt to comfort her, said, “These bangles won’t fit your hands. What, your boyfriend doesn’t even know your size?”

Radhika smiled, “Stupid, he doesn’t even know that these bangles wouldn’t fit even a ten-year old.”

Tanu smiled, putting her arms over Radhika shoulders, “He is really sweet.”

“I know. You know Tanu, sometimes I think I wasn’t good enough for him. Any other girl would have been overwhelmed by his commitment. He is really cute. He cared so much, remembered each and everything I asked him to do, but, his love wasn’t reflected in his performance. I didn’t want to force him to work hard. It’s his life. I am nobody to order him. All he needs is a sweet girl who gets flattered by his strange way of showing that he cares.”

Tanu smiled, “I can see that girl sitting right in front of me.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Time had come for all to concentrate on their studies. It sounded easy, but with freshers lurking around, it was not easy.

Time for fun and none of the second-year students took a backseat.

“Line up,” yelled Sourav to the freshers as they gathered in the TV room.

The terrified juniors did as told.

“Each one take one and light it up,” Shantanu pointed to the box containing cigarettes and locked the door from inside.

“Turn around and pull down your pants.”

Some were shocked; some were enjoying. They stood naked, facing the wall and revealing their hairy asses towards the seniors.

“Bend forward, insert the sticks inside and dance.”

The lights were turned off and a rave dance started to the tune of a snake-song from the movie, ‘*Nagin*’. In the midst of the burning fireflies, hooting, clapping, music and drinks, the *jugnu* (firefly) dance followed.

Ragging, better known as interaction between the juniors and seniors, began with the following questions thrown up by the seniors:

1>> Which three-letter word transforms a girl into a woman?

2>> At midnight, who is on top of the other?

3>> What is at front of a woman and the back of a cow?

4>> What does a man do on two legs and a dog on three legs?

5>> What does a girl do when she turns 18?

6>> What lies between your legs?

This question-answer phase is meant to screw the juniors. Vulgarism is not tolerated. Witty ones are released to go scot-free while the perverts are cornered and grilled. However, a few actually get to know the correct answers from their friends.

1>Mrs

2>Hands of a clock

3>The letter ‘w’.

4>Shake hand.

5>Vote.

6>Knees.

\* \* \* \* \*

What forced both Radhika and Apurv to direct their attention to studies were the following points:

Radhika: She broke up for its sake.

Apurv: He suffered a break up for not doing it.

Instead of dying in quest of water in a desert, it's better not to walk towards it. But a person immersed from toe to tip in love will undoubtedly do so.

Apurv followed Radhika to the reading room. The first day, they sat ten tables away from each other; this got reduced to five, then to three, then two, till they began to occupy the adjacent tables. Apurv tried his best to be near her, if not close.

At times, some unknown, unpredictable phenomenon gives a favourable turn to events. One day, Apurv was sitting inside the classroom, obviously studying. When Radhika passed by, all his friends started shouting, "Apurv, Apurv, *Radhika, Radhika.*"

Apurv looked, up, his heart filled with happiness. He thought, 'She looks so beautiful even though so simple. Must have got up fifteen minutes before class and yet she is looking so stylish, with her hair tied back and running to catch her friends. She's a cute, little, clumsy angel.'

*We are hounded by memories wherever we go. I will be yours and only yours, even if you turn your sight away.*

Radhika was a catch and she was no less now. So some guys with the intention of flirting with her would come and sit beside her in the RR (Reading Room) but return back good after a not-so-good an experience.

Apurv knew she was scared of strangers. He kept a vigil for three to four days, before going straight to her, "You better sit with me instead of being with those new jerks every day."

"But..."

"I won't talk to you; we will be like strangers."

He was suggesting the impossible with every intention of making it possible. As Radhika had to tolerate comments from the seniors of Kings Palace 3, which was on the way to the girls hostel from the library, Apurv started escorting her back to the hostel when they studied late in the reading room.

Radhika noticed a marked change in Apurv and how sincere he had become, but who was to break the ice first? The burden has to fall on the guy's shoulders as girls seldom accept their mistake, and even if they do, it's difficult for them to say it aloud.

One day, Apurv asked her out for a movie. They went out, but who was interested in watching it? Moreover as the movie was terrible, Apurv rested his arm over Radhika's shoulder. She moved it back to its place. Apurv again rested his arm, over her shoulder. She spurned it again. Apurv tried again and this time she laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

'She loves me,' he thought.

*Boy: I love you.*  
*Girl: Why me?*  
*Boy: Because you are one in a million.*  
*Girl: And how is that?*  
*Boy: 'Coz among the millions, I have fallen for you.*

### **Let's Get Committed Again!**

“Run Apurv, fast,” Radhika squealed, pulling Apurv’s hand forward.

“Let’s enjoy the rain,” Apurv pulled her towards him with obviously greater strength than what Radhika had. The force made Radhika trip over Apurv with her entire weight. Apurv stroked her hair and gently held them.

“I will get split ends if my hair gets wet,” Radhika said.

Apurv smiled and thought, ‘All girls will be girls and girls are really cute.’

They took shelter under a tree, but due to the downpour, the small tree didn’t succeed in shielding them. As a result, both of them stood a few inches apart with Apurv’s waterproof bag held over their heads. A perfect, romantic scene which was incomplete without a...

It took time, but soon got complete. The rain even stopped.

On their way back, Radhika nudged Apurv, “You are not a good kisser.”

“Haven’t got loads of experience like you, I guess...”

“I will teach you...”

“I am a good pupil...”

“Then I won't regret it.”

“When?”

“The next time it rains...”

The 'classes' did not have to wait long.

Seventy-two hours later, they were running to take shelter behind a pillar. The campus was isolated. Taking advantage of the quiet atmosphere around, they drew closer and Radhika engulfed in his arms.

"Someone promised something," he winked at her.

"Someone remembers it even," she added and looking at him, winked back.

Slowly he slid his hands underneath her top to feel the soft skin which was wet with raindrops dripping over them. His hand crept towards her navel till they found it.

"Your navel is really sexy."

"Not more than your soft, naughty lips.."

Holding her tightly by her waist, he gave her an upward thrust, with eyes locked into hers. She was high enough as he could feel her heart throbbing. The beats were heavier than usual and got carried to Apurv. He slowly let her down. She kissed him at all the spots which came parallel to her lips while descending down.

His forehead, eyes, cheeks, nose after repeatedly returning to her lips. She slowly licked his upper lip. Apurv closed his eyes to let the pleasurable feeling settle in. Then came the chance of the lower lip. She pressed her lips on his and then moving back, pressed a little harder than earlier. After that, it didn't matter whose lips were moving and whose were still.

The rain stopped and curious people started joining in. So, they rested in each other's arms, switching on their laptops.

"Apurv, in the earlier days, loving someone was a difficult and daring task. What do you say?" Radhika asked Apurv.

Without looking away from his laptop, he replied, "It still is. Those who don't, haven't loved the real way. They are just fooling around."



He was so true.

Shantanu broke up with his girlfriend on their first anniversary as he felt that he had wasted one whole year by being with only one girl. That was not his style, so he broke up. Let it be remembered however that his flirting with other girls never stopped during that period.

Shiv was committed to a Marwari girl from a very conservative family. When her family came to know about them, she was forced to leave the college and he received Rs 50,000 as compensation to stay away from her. He immediately bought an HTC Touch with that money.

Ashu proposed to Sneha. She played along as she knew he was already committed. Ashu persisted in proving that it was a rumour. To shoo him off, her reply was, "Even I am committed. My boyfriend is in another college."

Ashu's response was, "You are committed; I am committed. Both committed people should get committed to each other, isn't it?"

Some girls were not like Sneha. They had a boyfriend somewhere else, but a long-distance relationship can never be satisfactory, so one STD, one local call were the rules for the day.

## Momentum Conserved

Graveyard. Silence.

A few fans rotating at normal angular velocity. Scores of curtains swishing due to cross ventilation and a slight warm wind blowing across.

Footsteps heard.

Pigeons screeched on the shelf.

“Cool!! What a scene!!” Radhika exclaimed at the deserted Reading Room “Till yesterday, it was jam-packed. We had to sit on the stairs and now not a single *Homo sapiens* is visible here.”

“Do you really expect anyone to study the very next day of the mid-sessionals??” Apurv looked at her rounded eyes and laughed. He continued, “Do you think that’s the limit? While I was getting my pass stamped, I was asked the reason for coming to the library today.

“This time Apurv, ten-points, but let me inform you, studying after exams is injurious to health.” The same question was put to others. To study nowadays is not an *in thing*.

The punch line of every person who sees anyone studying is, “Why the hell do you study this much when all are going to get placed in the same company?” Each tries to prevent the other from studying and this applies to every normal ‘engineering’ student. It can be better termed as a tradition, rather than an ill will.

“Yeah, everyone knows that even if they botch their papers and don’t attend a single class to pre-placement training, all do get somewhere. For what else could they be paying six lakhs?”

“Anyways, who bothers about the herd? We have to prepare for as many competitions as lie ahead.”

“Yeah, let’s sit over there. The fan is directly over that table,” said Apurv and directed Radhika towards the second table in the first row and went to switch on the fan and the tube-lights.

“Hey Apurv, get the *The Times of India* for me,” shouted Radhika from behind, just in time to avoid the strict librarian from approaching near her. Slamming the heavy quantitative and verbal sections on the sunmica table, she nestled in the comfortable blue chair.

Apurv was back with *The Times of India* and *The Hindu*. Now started the CAT hunt. Building a vocabulary, noting points to be used for group discussions and personal interviews, reading magazines and collecting current affairs became a regular affair.

A single four-seater table was always occupied by only two of them and this allowed them to comfortably place their feet on the opposite chairs, while Apurv and Radhika sat side by side for physical proximity and conversation.

*Quantum Numbers*, a book considered to be very effective by CAT worshippers, lay on their table.

“Look here, Apurv.”

“What?”

“English in this quantitative section! Read it.”

“Really, can anyone say whether this book is for quantitative section or for testing our English skills?” exclaimed a perturbed Apurv, eyeing the book.

“Dual purpose at the price of one!”

Enthusiasm glowed on their faces as preparation started much before the usual practice of beginning in the fourth year. Impetus backed by determination helped them study seriously.

With passage of time, a feeling of superiority crept in, as they felt they were at a competitive advantage than the others. The feeling of excellence blinded them to the fact that they were bunking classes beyond the limit.

“Don’t you think we should join a correspondence course at a popular institute?” suggested Apurv.

“Yeah, we can get from either TIME or IMS.”

“Some e-books can also be downloaded and we can give mock online exams...”

“This Sunday we can plan it up,” agreed Radhika.

With little difficulty, Apurv arranged for the previous year’s TIME’s package.

“Are they crazy? The first-year textbooks are unopened till now and they expect us to solve this much?” asked an agitated Apurv, throwing a swooning look.

“Mr Apurv, you have to, dear, get into some elite institute,” smiled Radhika.

“So many concepts, more shortcuts to remember than actual methods. How can anyone remember all of them??”

“It’s easy to remember the shortcuts and they look tempting after doing a few problems, but when you try them on the D-day, you will end messing them up. I read somewhere that it is better to try to do the calculations faster rather than using too many tricks. They simply make the situations complicated.”

“But we will do it...we will...”

Thus the fight phase began. A few more Sundays passed before the actual Sunday arrived, their laptops were plugged on.

Apurv and Radhika had to race against the stopwatch.

“Hurry up, sweetheart, five minutes to go. How many questions left?” winked Apurv.

“Just shut up and continue your work,” Radhika snapped back.

The stopwatch chimed, signalling the end of their mock CAT.

“I finished all data interpretation in just 10 minutes. Isn’t that interesting?” Apurv asked.

“Something more interesting is going on over there.”

Apurv followed her gaze directly beneath the table at the far end of the vacant RR.

Four legs were swinging opposite to each other. Taking advantage of the absence of people and any barrier between the opposite chairs, the two pair of legs were entwined under the table. His toes felt her soft skin inside her skirt with the other leg stuck in between hers. Her legs seemed to be too engrossed to let him go. His feet kept digging deeper inside her skirt with the aim of trying to find a smoother area to scan.

“Ujjwal and Riya!! I thought he was single!” said Apurv.

“Yeah, even Riya said they enjoy being ‘just’ friends,” smirked Radhika.

“But now we have solid proof that they are together! Another gossip story tonight!” concluded Radhika, as they headed out to Coffee Break downstairs for a steaming cup of cappuccino after the gruesome battle.

*Mana ki college mein padhna chahiye, likhna chahiye, padhna chahiye, likhna chahiye...romance ka bhi ek lecture hona chahiye.*

Their enthusiasm waned somewhat on seeing the mock question paper for the CAT exams.

“So many concepts, all in a single question! Graphs, functions, quadratic equations, probability, Venn diagrams. The time limit is just three minutes. Can a mortal possibly solve such questions within the stipulated time?” Complained an intensely frustrated Apurv, one Saturday. “Hey! But my English has improved!”

“Does it really entail hard work or people are simply destined? Such cut-throat GD and PI. Even if you do get 99.9 per cent, you have to compete against the top 4,000 to get to IIMs.”

Radhika could feel the pressure too.

If the projection velocity is high then the acceleration due to gravity also complements to the same extent. In less technical words, what goes up, comes down faster.

“Let’s go out for some water and cool air,” Apurv suggested. “Wait here, I am coming from the washroom.” Apurv left her.

Radhika felt the cold water splash across her face. Before relief could settle in, a voice called out.

“Second year? Come here.”

The usual introductions started. On seeing five savage fourth-year students harassing his little Radhs, Apurv rushed to her aid. On noticing a guy with her, they backed off.

“These fourth-year students think they too are studying for CAT! Simply desperate to catch girls! With no girls in their own batch, the oldies eye the junior hot ties, especially when they are a rare sight in a reading room,” Radhika said, offending their moral sense.

“You could have waited for me. As you were alone, you got into this mess.”

“Oh yeah, that was only left. All boys are obsessed with the feeling of being a boy, strong, protective and all that.”

“I know my undertaker, you don’t need anybody. I just wanted to be present there.”

Days passed and the day came when Radhika revealed her hidden trait as an ‘undertaker.’

On entering the Reading Room, Radhika got disturbed at the sight of Apurv sitting with Nimisha, chatting and laughing. Nimisha was eyeing him and Apurv was looking no less at ease

listening to her. Radhika caught him in the act. Furiously she walked passed the table without even glancing at them while Apurv had caught her expression.

Going towards Radhika, he hurriedly picked up a book from the shelf and sat in front of her. She sat there, fuming with anger.

“What’s that?” Radhika inquired.

“Recently heard from seniors about GMAT and GRE. Just decided to check them out,” said Apurv, thrusting the book towards her and trying to manoeuvre the talk in another direction.

“Wasn’t CAT enough, that you have got this?”

Radhika was a tough nut to crack. After a lot of persuasion, Apurv managed to calm her down.

“Check them out,” Apurv tried some of the questions from the GMAT diagnostic test.

It reminded him of the nursery rhyme ‘*Twinkle Twinkle little star.*’ In comparison to CAT, the last lime of the nursery rhyme seemed applicable here to him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Steps toward the target have to be slow, but steady. Any task undertaken with extra-enthusiasm invariably ends abruptly accompanied with an oppressive feeling of frustration. With a huge pile of books, xeroxed copies and a large portion of the syllabus left, the third sessionals knocked on their head. Their hopes towards the future weren’t working out well. CAT was still some time away in the fourth year, but the college exams were just a week away. The desire to do hard work isn’t the best approach for any competition. Intelligence is like radioactive uranium inside the brain, which decays over a period of time if not regularly used.

The empty space gets filled up with the belief of being thwarted in attaining one's goals. A balance has to be maintained.

This however dawned a bit too late on them.

The other people taunted Apurv and Radhika for their regular presence in the Reading Room and often queried them about it.

"No preparation; we are gon'na fail this time," was Radhika's reply.

"This is a deemed university. You got to have the capacity to fail," Apurv joked.

"Even nine pointers don't study much and we have taken a leaf out of their book this time."

"Studying doesn't affect grades much. It's all about impression. Those who have got nine points once continue getting that, while those who haven't will never do," continued Apurv.

"Yeah, the topper of our class goes to the exams with a micro xerox of the whole copy," Radhika said, giving a disgusted look.

"Why do people devote so much time mugging up teachers' notes and trying to butter up the teachers?"

Exams passed away like a rollercoaster ride, leaving Apurv and Radhika rudely shaken.

"I don't want to repeat the same mistake that I committed four years ago, leaving out the preparation for Boards and IIT-JEE. The probability is one in 100 and the same applies to CAT..."

"Yeah, one in hand is better than two in the bush..."



*The problem with the rat race is that even if you win, you're still a rat.*

– Lily Tomlin

## CAT Hunt, a Rat Race

“Why are you pissed off so much? This time our exams went off better than in the previous semester,” Apurv tried to assure Radhika.

“You know what Daddy had said after the first semester? He said that when you first start college, an invisible yet distinct division takes place among the students, depending on their rank in the entrance exams. The division has value till the first semester but after that you are ranked according to the marks in them. The grouping stays till the placements, after which you are ranked according to the placement package offered. On joining the corporate sector, that division loses its worth. Then your progress rate in terms of performance appraisal becomes your benchmark. Winning every battle doesn't matter much and there is no guarantee that people excelling now will continue to excel in future too. *But till then, on losing every single one, you will have to face its aftermath till you win the next.* Others will make fun of us on seeing us spend 12 hours a day in the library.”

“Why do you need to bother about what the people say? You won't stop studying further and besides, we are not just studying for grade points,” Apurv replied.

“That's only an excuse. A person bent on accomplishing the goal never looks out for excuses.”

“Staying in a Reading Room doesn't mean only studying, dear. Every day, at least an hour is wasted for lunch, three hours

for gossip and coffeeing, another hour in front of the water cooler, two hours reading the newspapers and what not. The remaining hours in which we actually study are devoted to CAT.”

“But CAT is an apparent and transparent process. GMAT and dreams of going abroad seem futile. We don’t even know what exactly needs to be done. The CAT preparations would have helped in the placements too. Now we will have to put in double the effort.”

But she understood that their latest decision was the better one as even stated by an old Chinese proverb: *the best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago, the next best time is now*. In place of CAT, the GMAT sapling had been planted.

The twelve hours spent in the Reading Room transformed into twelve hours of study.

*Labour does not always account for productivity. Victory doesn’t come just from running towards the goal; it comes from following the best possible path for it.*

It’s the journey which teaches and develops the capability for deserving the goal.

“Just now I checked the official website of GMAT and GRE. I found out that cut off in GMAT for good colleges is around 700 and for GRE, it’s 1400,” Apurv said to Radhika over the phone.

*They say that no goal is too small for an ignorant, and no goal is too big for a vigilant person.*

“Why do you crack such stupid jokes after midnight? I bet it won’t be that high,” said Radhika, half-asleep and rubbing her eyes.

“You can check the site yourself if you don’t believe me.”

The next morning, Apurv and Radhika greeted each other with a dejected look.

Finally Radhika broke the silence, “Don’t you think we should resume our CAT preparation again?”

Apurv’s mind stormed for a while and then came to the conclusion, “No, that won’t be a good idea. GMAT and GRE scores are valid for five years from the date of the exams. Besides, there are numerous colleges around the world which take these tests. The cut off, I was told yesterday, was just for the top universities. There are several others which are no less in comparison to the institutes in India.”

“But studying in India is far more convenient – easy process, easy loans, easy pocket money. Going abroad means working part-time and seeking assistantships. Livelihood will be difficult...”

“But think about the packages. They are far better than the package you will receive after two years from an Indian institute. And GRE and GMAT will require half the amount of labour you will be putting in CAT. You will be paid in dollars and Euros and besides, there will be no entry time in co-ed hostels.”

Radhika, though not thoroughly convinced, opted for GRE and GMAT preparations. She found it somewhat vague and feared it could lead to failure.

New endeavours, new practices, newly accepted habits led to a shift from the choice of subjects to read – from reading news to reading world news.

CAT books were replaced by *Barron*, *Princeton Review*, *Kaplan* and similar others. Online mock exams and staying back in college during holidays became their new *mantra* and so did their presence at each and every event in the college where there was even the slightest chance of getting certificates in extra-curricular activities.

Joining as volunteers in IFEES (International Federation of Engineering Education Societies) and ISTE (Indian Society for Technical Education) conferences earned them more than just a

few certificates. On getting acquainted with eminent personalities and deans of foreign universities, they could clear their doubts regarding the Western countries. For instance, they couldn't speak fluent English as Indians can ever hope to catch up with the Englishpersons. They also take pauses while talking, brooding over words. They are however compassionate in learning all about the Indian lifestyle and tradition. One delegate, Julia, became so enthusiastic that she came dressed in a saree on all the five days of the workshop. She looked more of an Indian than any of the Indians present there. But what made her stand out was her comment on Soumya's Lord Ganesha pendant: "Oh! I like that cute elephant," she said.

Apurv was helping in event management while Radhika was assisting in the foreign delegation committee. They didn't get much time to be with each other especially with seniors in event management ensuring that nobody left early.

"Hey! Where are you going? There is still work left," some fourth-year students intercepted Apurv's move to escape from there.

"*Bhaiya*, so many guys are on work; one volunteer missing won't make much of a difference," Apurv tried to rationalise.

"No, you can't go," his Head cut him short.

Another fourth-year saviour came to his rescue, "Sneaking out to meet your girlfriend?"

Apurv smiled.

"Then rush..." the saviour smiled back.

"Be back in five minutes," his Head said sharply.

"Take no less than two hours," the angelic voice cheered him again.

Apurv mused, 'Definitely, he must also be having a girlfriend.'

Apurv rushed from the two of his seniors to meet Radhika in the seminar hall in electrical department. Foreign delegates were being shown a documentary on the architecture of monuments in Orissa.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now most parents demanded of children to consider studying in India due to the increase in incidents of Indian students getting beaten up in Australia and other institutes of the world.

“First the recession and then one more company out of the market,” Radhika said, referring to the Satyam scandal and embezzlement of funds leading to crash of the corporate giant.

“But, see the pros too. Such a big company cannot go out of the market just because of a loss of a few thousand crores. The stocks are hitting new lows every day.”

“So?”

“The shares cost much less; we can buy a few. The prices are bound to shoot up once some other company acquires it.”

Point was well said, well taken and well done. A few thousand bucks of investment and they could be into online trading and stocking.

With recession hitting the IT sector, the students feared limited opportunities for finding placement in a suitable enterprise.

After checking on websites of several renowned universities, they felt enthused to study more seriously.

Normally every person runs so as not to be the last than be the first. That’s where enters Shiv Khera. Both Apurv and Radhika read his book *You can Win* and got set to win. But as it is said, your past always haunts you.

“Radhs, I just found out that it’s just not enough to obtain a good score; it’s equally important to score a good grade point in graduation.”

“Life is never too small for rectifying your mistakes.”

“Oh, my baby! A motivator.”

“Can’t I be? I have motivated a nerd like you.”

Romance encouraged the two to dress in flamboyant outfits to the Reading Room and complement each other for that. Then they would immerse themselves in their books with no talking in between.

Apurv would study with earphones stuffed in his ears. Whenever Radhika wanted to discuss anything, he used to stop her from disturbing him. Radhika couldn’t protest as now he was doing what she had always wanted him to do. Apurv wanted to spend some time cuddling up to her and playing with her hair, but he feared Radhika would consider it running away from his studies. Though ostensibly everything seemed normal, in reality nothing was. They no longer talked about themselves but became study partners. They were no longer lovers. Finally, the relationship became inoperable.

## Do You Really Feel the Way I Do?

"You could have discussed all your problems with me. Why the hell are you standing like this with all my gifts?" Apurv asked. "Must you remind me of the breakup nonsense again and again?"

"Now all you do is to study. Now you don't love me. You aren't able to play both roles at the same time. At this moment, you haven't got a clue to what's troubling me, what's on my mind...." said Radhika.

"Radhika, I have always wanted to preserve you like a pearl," complained Apurv.

"All my time is spent in thinking about you, encouraging you, but now you don't even know what's going on in my life. I am losing everything in my attempt to be with you. I stay all the time with you; I have no friends any more. It has been ages since I properly chatted with Tanu or Sophia," replied Radhika.

"We have spent so much time together, don't you remember how much we talked? Try to remember the small joys and moments of happiness we have had together. Try to remember how much we cared for each other. My heart pains to find you so distant from me. Even I have no friends; I stay all the time with you thinking about you," said Apurv.

"All that is history. I always imagined a perfect guy who would be hardworking enough to make me feel proud and loving enough to make me warm," said Radhika.

"Oh, shut up! When will you come out of your make-believe world and accept the reality as it is. There is no guarantee that you will find someone you have always dreamt

about, so rather than running after a mirage, why don't you appreciate the qualities in me and try to be happy with me?"

"I feel lonely in your presence. I don't find us connected any more," said Radhika.

"If I wouldn't have loved you would I have remembered everything that's associated with you? Would I have prayed to God every day for you? Would I have undergone excruciating pain on learning that your health isn't good. Would I have wished that we were always together for all the years to come?"

She fell silent. Her eyes were swollen after discharging her tears.

Apurv whispered softly, "Whenever we walk together, I come to the side of the traffic so that you would remain safe always. I have never left you alone when crossing a road. I really care for you and you are the most precious thing in this world for me. Tell me Radhs, what can I do to get our love to the same old level? Tell me what to do, and I will do that."

"That's the difference. I don't turn to anybody to tell me what I have to do and how to do it. Successful and unsuccessful people, both have the ability to perform but the former does that before the latter realises that something needs to be done."

An angry Apurv walked along ahead, leaving her behind to avoid listening to her never-ending complaints. But Radhika's sobs prevented him from doing so any further. He turned around, sped towards her and hugged her, "This preparation has driven all romance out of our lives. Just be ready for hell of a lot of romance," and he kept his promise.

Pre-Valentine's Day, they indulged in kissing when nobody was around, holding hands under the table, writing love notes on chits and passing them while being in the Reading Room, listening to the same love song at a time. This way romance and studies moved parallel to each other.



Valentine's Day beckoned, the first V-Day after coming together. Big day meant equally big plans.

**11:59, 13th February**

"Pre-Valentine Day, I have something for you, Radhs. Pull away the curtains," Apurv called over the phone.

All the lights on top of the Queen's Castle were switched on.

She saw beautiful, red, heart-shaped balloons flying past her window. In each balloon was written, 'I love you Radhs, forever!' Hundreds of soap bubbles accompanied the balloons, gently touching her face. Amidst the balloons and rainbow bubbles stood Apurv with a bouquet of red roses.

"Come down to the reception gate," Apurv shouted to her.

The clock struck midnight and Radhika rushed downstairs.

"The guard may not be asleep. You can't pass on the roses to me like this."

Apurv scanned the area in front of the girls' hostel. Suddenly from nowhere a flying paper appeared over the football field. Apurv ran to catch it. After half a mile of chase, he managed to find a paper big enough to camouflage the bunch of roses.

"I love you, be mine forever," he said and passed the bouquet through the hostel's reception gate.

The reception was closed and Apurv wrapped the roses with paper, lest the guard woke up and caught him.

"These lines and gifts are always so obvious..."

"There are nineteen roses, one for this year and the others to make up for the last eighteen years when I was not with you..."

The bouquet had a small note tucked inside. It read: 'Desperately waiting to see you in the mesmerising gown. How

gorgeous you will look tomorrow! Even the thought of it makes me awestruck.'

#### 14<sup>th</sup> February, Valentine's Day

Radhika came out of the hostel, wearing her V-day gift – a gown with glittering work on it. Heads turned, as Apurv held her hands and they moved towards the campus exit.

The Bajrang Dal and Shiv Sena activists' warnings combined with commencement of KRITANSH proved effective in keeping the other couples inside.

They landed up in probably the safest place for expressing love – the newly constructed Rock Garden in the School of Management. Surrounded with sculptures, Apurv bent down on his knees, kissed her hands and slipped in a platinum ring on her ring finger. Then he presented Radhika a big purple card, half her size, accompanied with heart-shaped candies, loads of chocolates and a Cadbury Temptation, which was her favourite.

"I love you too, *jaanu!*" she kissed him, bending forward on top of a rock.

She presented him two beautiful cards with self-created love quotes and a painting inside. They kissed again, celebrating their love on their first Valentine's Day together.

"Thank you so much for making this day so special. This V-Day I have someone to celebrate with. Every year, this day, I sat alone and longed for love...I wished someone were there to hold my hand and make me his. I imagined in my dreams that some day someone would enter my life to make this day special. I am so lucky to have you," Radhika said and rested her head on his chest before kissing it.

"V-Day every year was just another day for me. It is you who has given meaning to it, who has taught me love. Each day is a day to cherish when you are in it. The wish to have someone

to love, buy gifts and cards on this day has come true because of you. You have provided the soul to my skeleton. I love you.”

“I am yours forever; never leave me.”

“I will be there for you, always,” promised Apurv.

They kissed again, forgetting the world around them.

The next few moments passed by sharing couplets in Café Coffee Day and having lunch at Pizza Hut. Not seeing any activists around, their courage increased and they visited different malls, and went to a movie. Apurv received a shirt as his V-Day gift. Apparently being in love is not that inexpensive.

Their day ended, but night started at 10 p.m. what with the DJ night and dance at Ground Zero.

“You know, I have always expressed and proved my love for you but you have never told me what you feel about me,” Apurv said.

“You never asked me before. Wait and watch,” Radhika remarked.

The next second Radhika was standing in front of Apurv to announce loudly to the gathered few who had nothing to do, “This is just to say, I love you. But it can’t be said so easily. I need to say it in a special way. It’s for the most important person in my life; rather, I should say, my *life* only. I want everybody to hear this.” Some murmurs arose. Radhika smiled and went close to Apurv to whisper, “My life is so beautiful coz you are there which makes my life this beautiful.” She again faced everybody, “It’s not possible to sum up our story or my feelings for you in a flow but I will try. Forgive me if I miss anything,” she beamed. “So here’s a short flashback on how we became so close...the first time we met, the way we walked hand in hand...”

Apurv laughed seeing his already dramatic girlfriend’s most dramatic side. Radhika continued with a bit of a giggle, “Actually nothing like that happened. We first met over Orkut and at that time I never thought Apurv was the one who was

going to become my life. After that, chatting started and we chatted for three-four months by spending an average of 12 hours a day, whatever be the situation. Whether we had exams approaching or an important event taking place, we never failed to chat. Our bonding grew stronger with time and we started sharing everything with each other. Then my laptop played a cementing role in our relationship. Oops! I missed something! We first went out to CCD where I did his BMS diagram. That was our first date. Finally, after a long wait, he proposed to me on 26th March.”

Hooting began.

Radhika directed her gaze towards Apurv, “That’s the most special day of my life till now and as you are with me, many more are still to come.”

He noticed her eyes were wet. Radhika was almost weeping with emotions, “Together we have shared a lot of things and moments till now. We have advanced a lot in our relationship. Now, I am madly in love with you and will love you till the end of time.”

The surrounding herd grinned at whatever they could understand and imagine. Radhika ignored them and started walking towards Apurv with slow steps, “In you, I have found a friend, a companion, a lover, a soulmate. When you are with me, I can’t wish for anything more. You are the one who never gets tired of looking at me constantly, even when I look away. You are the one who holds my hand everywhere and I know it’s going to be like this forever. You are the one in whose arms I can spend my whole life. On this Valentine’s Day, I want to wish only one thing and that is we should always stay together and celebrate this day in the years to come.”

She went and stood in front of him and said, “I love you and won’t ever stop loving you.” By the time Radhika finished, the hooting by the crowd stopped to be replaced with just oohs

and aahs. Contrary to the kind of comments made in engineering colleges, the situation was positive out there.

“Watch out that you two never separate.”

“You rock as a couple.”

“Hey man ! You have got a daring girl.”

Radhika raised her eyebrows, questioning Apurv. Apurv nodded his head in approval.

## How Many Bytes?

The fourth semester exams were round the corner “Maybe, if we study, we won’t get great CGPA position. But if we won’t, then we will kill each and every chance of it.”

Apurv had revised all the questions that had appeared in the past five years, including the ones for supplementary. That was an endeavour which they had gone through many times. They did everything this time – right from studying for the two-marks viva to running behind teachers and getting their internal marks increased. They started preparation from fifteen days before the exams while giving a damn to those who said, ‘I give a shit to sessionals.’

“I am so glad we are actually going to sleep before the paper. That too after revision,” Radhika chuckled over the phone.

“Yeah, otherwise two days are left for the exams, that is, forty-eight hours of study,” Apurv laughed.

To their surprise, they discovered that being regular was better than studying just before the exams. In the latter case, they always ended up frustrated and blaming the system due to their failure to utilise the spare time on hand.

\* \* \* \* \*

“You know Radhika, since the past few months, we have actually got a new surrounding of our own. All our acquaintances include couples. We wave at all the couples as we pass by; we smile at other couples.

“Don’t you think all the couples have got a basic common mechanism, that’s why understanding is better. For instance, the relationship I have got with you – we come back at seven, we talk over the phone; we do chatting; we don’t bother each other and still share a great understanding. Thanks to the committed bonding,” said Apurv, feeling proud at his observation.

“Yeah, now our best friends are Shreya and Sujoy. Don’t you think that lately we four have started sharing a lot of our time together? I like being with them. We recently skipped being in each other’s company and in spite of being with them, we can act like couples. There’s nothing to pretend in front of them,” Radhika smiled.

Everyone likes the company of ‘like-us’ people. Sujoy also used to come to drop Shreya, as Apurv used to drop Radhika. After that, Apurv would walk back with Sujoy to the hostel and Radhika accompanied Shreya through the lonely corridors of their hostel.

It was perfect but perfect was a word a bit too early to be stated. Once, while studying, Apurv and Radhika decided to take a little coffee-cum-chat break. They approached the table where Sujoy and Shreya were seated to ask them whether they could join them. But one close glance at them revealed that the situation was a bit too grim.

Shreya was in tears and Sujoy was fuming. The problem was that Sujoy didn’t like what Shreya was wearing because he felt that whenever she dressed up boldly, others passed comments. The night that followed went in discussion and the misunderstanding continued in the respective hostels too. As known to all, girls can never keep anything to themselves – even Radhika-Shreya’s discussion became more prominent over Apurv-Sujoy’s.

“Radhs, the problem is not that he said something about my dress, but I don’t know why he rakes up all the past incidents and starts fighting over all the *already dealt* issues.”

“Apurv, what’s the need to make the same mistake again, when she knows what I like then?”

“Radhika, we don’t stay together much and talk much less on the phone. You two are always together or at the phone.”

“Apurv, I stay at home. How can I talk over the phone for long hours? If you had stayed at home, Radhika would have understood your problem. Is it not?”

“Radhs, he doesn’t care for me. See, you two are so connected that you never argue.”

“Apurv, she never understands my feelings the way Radhika does yours.”

Radhika and Apurv trapped in this battle could not understand why the two were fighting for no reason at all. Then it struck them that they too did the same and quite often. Both of them rushed towards their cell phones. They dialled each other’s number. Number was busy. Finally Radhika got connected,

“Hi, love...”

“Such a warm welcome.”

“I just wanted to say ‘I love you’.”

“I was calling you for the same.”

“I was with Shreya, and through her eyes I saw how perfect a couple we are. I began to appreciate your qualities and the effort you put into our relationship and make it run to the greatest possible extent.”

“And I realised that all couples have their ups and downs. Maybe outsiders find them futile but for the couple themselves, it is important. And in spite of fighting and quarrelling, they



don't part ways, and neither does their love decrease for each other."

*A lover says, "I will do whatever I can," while a soulmate says, "I will do whatever it takes."*

## Spontaneous Reaction

### Fourth Semester Results

Speculations were rife among the second-year students over their results.

Silently Apurv and Radhika sat on the B-block sofa with Radhika biting her nails.

"The results are on the C-block notice-board," someone informed them.

Apurv was back after 10 minutes, with a grim face.

"What happened? Have you seen the marks?" Radhika enquired with a troubled smile.

"We both have got 9.1!"

Radhika broke into a smile, "Idiot! You scared me! Congrats!"

"Congrats to you too, sweetheart!"

"But...you see," Radhika pointing to the other merrymakers and rejoicers, "many have got more than us! Even Tanu has got 9! So much improvement still required. So many things to do..."

"These girls can't be content with anything!" thought Apurv. "Let's see if there's any upcoming event to participate in."

\* \* \* \* \*

19<sup>th</sup> October

**Udghosh – The Brand Equity Quiz!**

“Radhs, come fast or we will be late. This is one of the biggest quizzing events and I don’t wan’na miss it,” said Apurv. Irritated at Radhika’s casual attitude, he disconnected the call.

Some twenty minutes later, they were walking towards the auditorium. Radhika was furious with Apurv for wasting her time.

“If you like quizzing, go for it but why the hell are you dragging me with you?”

“I can very well handle questions related to general knowledge, technology, business and puzzles. But, your knowledge about movies, advertisements and entertainment is far better than mine. I want our combined intellectual capital to make us win. I have confidence in you. If we pair up together, we’ll do far better than if I had someone else for a partner. We will definitely win.”

“Wasting my Sunday for a stupid thing! I never ask you to paint or dance with me...” Radhika screamed.

“Tell me, will it harm us in anyway, if we end up winning prizes and certificates by spacing just a few hours?”

The auditorium was full as everyone waited for the quizmaster.

But Radhika had a different view. “There are so few girls and none of the guys have brought their girlfriends along...” she said, scanning the entire auditorium. Apurv, perceived her answer as an excuse to quit.

“How does it matter anyway? Everyone is paired with someone who they think has the best potential and I have done the same and not because you are my girlfriend!”

“Screw you! I am leaving. Landing me in such an embarrassing situation. We needn’t be together in everything.

You do whatever you like, let me do mine. You know why I encourage you to quiz? 'Coz I know you are good at it and you can win. I want you to taste the sweetness of victory, so that you know what it feels like to win and try to win in other spheres of life too. You always drag me into this in spite of knowing how awful I feel when I am not able to answer anything," Radhika said, walking out of the auditorium with Apurv trailing behind.

"Don't follow me. Let me be myself," she reprimanded him and walked out of the campus gate angrily. He followed.

"I am not forcing you. I agree you don't like quiz events and the like, but can't I expect you to spare a few hours for me? For us, to share a win together?"

"Hell, no!" she said. Her voice wasn't the only thing that cracked. The LCD of her cell phone went flying perpendicular to the SIM card. Nokia N73 blew apart into its constituent pieces.

They parted ways, both towards their own hostels.

*For being a perfect couple, we don't need to be equally good in the same thing and at the same time.*

*We are good in our own ways and united, we are perfect.*

\* \* \* \* \*

"You have joined one of the best institutes in the country. Our GMAT course is accredited by the Management Council."

"So, which are the institutions we can join??" inquired Radhika.

"You can join the Red Cross Society, CRY, CARE, UNICEF or even NSS and Olive Ridley Turtle Conservation project at the local level," said the Director of IMS, the MBA-entrance coaching institute which they had joined.

"That's cool! We can join all of them. Each Sunday for each one."

“The B-schools will say if you like social service so much, why are you going for an MBA? Go for social service rather. So join only one or two.”

Apurv and Radhika made it a point to visit the Red Cross Society and NSS to volunteer their services.

“Isn’t it good that they will pay even Rs 1,000 which is a good amount of pocket money. We can buy dresses for you,” Apurv said, heading towards the Red Cross office.

Radhika smiled. Both of them enrolled themselves in a project for imparting education to the tribal children. After some days, Radhika said to Apurv, “What the crap! Going every day to the muddy school and teaching there for hours...”

“And so many mosquitoes...”

“Our studies are even suffering. I think we should drop the idea.”

Both were pretty irritated at the pains they had to take but still carried on.

In life very few are happy with their situation, but they know that they can’t come out of it. If they had been capable, they wouldn’t have been in the situation in the first case. Still they try to maintain some sort of a profile.

Apurv and Radhika worked in the blood donation camp.

The next project was nursing the ailing homeless who were victims of the Orissa flood. Their team’s task was to distribute food, blankets and administer care to the admitted patients.

They always escaped from work and avoided the struggle involved. But gradually they started looking at it beyond getting certificates or part of the MBA preparation.

One day, seeing some kids play with toys, Radhika remembered her childhood.

“It’s amazing how our thought process changes with time. When I was a kid, I used to think about doing things for the

society when I grew up. I wanted to care for them, adopt many orphans, give them education and a life while teaching them to do the same in their own lives. If orphans are adopted, and they in turn adopt other kids after growing up, the future could be transformed for all these small kids...”

“Yeah, our thinking changes. Gradually everyone becomes selfish, thinking only of his own emotional and monetary gains, forgetting his goals harboured during childhood. When I was in high school, my team and I, as a part of Interact Club, went to a tiny=tots’ school for teaching children from the surrounding villages and we all enjoyed it. Doing good to others makes you feel good. Now, we are here for our career, our goals, and not really for these people, but I have changed. What I thought during my childhood is no longer remembered by me.”

“People are not remembered by what they earn; they are remembered by what they give to others.”

People’s insights change throughout their life. Theirs did too. They acted according to their conscience and completed the rest of their activities.

There were great opportunities for gaining experience in leadership and relief work. Within a few weeks, they accumulated the knowledge and skill that they gained through participation in such activities.

*Someone came in my dream yesterday,  
Someone seeped in my heart yesterday,  
Consequently, I remained awake whole night,  
Sleep disappeared from my eyes...*

## Love Sucks, Lust Rocks

“It’s been a long time since we kissed, busy as we have been in social service and exams. What do you say?” asked Apurv, mockingly bringing the mouthpiece closer lest his roommates heard him.

“Shut up...!” she replied.

“Think about it seriously, just you and me on a boat, in some faraway lake. A small boathouse decorated with candles and perfumed candles everywhere.”

“Yeah, of course, why not??”

“You were looking sexy in the knee-length, lacy, red gown. I imagined you standing on the edge of the boat. I came closer and kissed you on your neck...”

“Yeah, certainly. Carry on.”

“Then I ran my right hand slowly up your legs, feeling it, skin by skin and my other hand swirling within your flock of hair.”

Apurv could feel Radhika’s heartbeat rising. She was drowning in the silvery imagination. “Then...”

“Then I tilted your head and kissed all over your neck. I moved your hair backward and pushed you to the railing of the boat. I bent forward and kissed you. You forgot the whole world around. You felt my lips pressing all over you. I pulled your gown up, revealing your legs and rubbed your soft thighs. Can you feel it?”

“Yes...”

“I lifted you and laid you on the soft pink bed. Would you like to know what’s happened next?”

“Yes, I am...”

But he broke away from the topic.

“You know, although I never told you before, whenever you wear tight tops, your breasts look curvaceous. I wonder how irresistible they would look when bare...”

“Hey, I never imagined such thoughts could be on your mind, when we were together. I never gauged that you were busy building your sexual imagination, while we were reading, talking, eating...” she blabbered.

“What the hell?” Apurv said angrily over the phone “Why didn’t you stop me the moment I started? Why did you encourage me?”

“I wanted to see that side of yours which you had been hiding from me for so long. Like the other guys, you also want the same thing.”

“After being together for so long, after loving you so much, this was the last thing I wished to hear from you. You haven’t got an inch of trust in me, I feel. I can’t do anything else to generate faith in you,” Apurv said and hung up.

Radhika tried calling him again, *The customer you are trying to reach is either switched off or not reachable. Please call after some time*, was the reply.

Five days passed without talking to each other. This time the egos of both were hurt. Nobody was willing to relent.

Finally Apurv called her for a discussion meet. For a change, Apurv did all the talking while Radhika listened to him obediently. This was one hell of a rare sight.

“Every time we have come closer, you have created a big fuss about it. Even after our first kiss, you didn’t even let the



feeling settle within your illogical reasoning. You don't doubt my love, and yet you always regret coming close to me. Why can't you understand we love each other and coming close is just a way of expressing it?" Apurv glanced at Radhika. She was listening with her eyes fixed to the ground.

"You don't have any problem when I express it emotionally and psychologically. I am the only guy you love, but when I come close, I become just another guy who is using you for physical pleasure. Can't you feel my love whenever I touch you?" Apurv paused to stop himself from pleading as he wanted her to understand him; he didn't want to make her agree to his viewpoint unwillingly.

"I come near you, not for physical satisfaction, but for the love I want to express. What's wrong in it?"

Radhika looked at him helplessly. Apurv held her by the shoulder, "Even when I fantasise, it's only about you. You should be exhilarated by the feeling that no other girl attracts me the way you do. But the way you behave, you will one day make me lose all interest in you."

Radhika began to weep and Apurv gasped, looking away and thinking, 'I am exhausted and by putting this thing in her mind, I've made her cry. Even this discussion will end up like the previous ones. Tears for a woman are the deadliest weapon of all. I feel guilty and end up apologising.'

But against all his expectations, "I am sorry," came from Radhika.

He hugged her and whispered in her ear, "If you view our relationship without being reserved, you will find that it only increases our bonding. It makes you mine and me as yours to a great extent. It makes our love richer."

"It was never that I didn't trust you. It was merely that the way you express it, I wasn't able to handle it. I didn't intend to hurt you."

“I will always be there for you, honey...”

Passersby threw them astonished looks on seeing a girl weep and a frustrated guy trying to convince her. To lighten her mood and avoid unnecessary awkwardness, Apurv held her hand and they sat together to discuss their memorable moments of love.

Apurv gifted her a mini wind-chime, which had a small ice-like cube attached to the lower end.

“Thank you! It’s so pretty. I like its melting ice effect...”

The next few nights were spent on romancing over the phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking out the Stanford website, but now that you have called, I am talking to you. What are you wearing?”

“The night gown you gifted...”

“I wish to see you without it.”

“Mr Apurv in a romantic mood?”

“I want to embrace you and feel you everywhere; feel you as mine.”

“That’s not possible, baby, I am quite out of your reach.”

“Everything is possible; where there’s a will, there is a way.”

“What do you mean? Are you crazy? I bet you can’t...”

“Wait and watch, I am closer than you think.”

Apurv knew the multiple channels leading out of Kings Palace 5. Numerous times during the night-outs, he and his group had entered inside through the first floor window. It was child’s play for him. He walked down the corridors to the first-floor window and crept down the pipe. With the guard asleep, he walked past the main gate and out of the broken hostel wall. He crossed the Kosi campus library made of glass, shining in the moonlight. Ten minutes of walking and planning and he was in front of Queen’s Castle. The cream building was far from

inviting. There was no point in disturbing the sleep of the guards.

“Such high walls! Fuck! There must be some way.”

The gate in front of the physics lab was locked and that happened to be the only entrance into the campus, close to the girls’ hostel.

‘Construction is going on in the new block. There ought to be some open gap,’ he thought. He was right. The painters had left the bamboo frame. He climbed over the barbwire wall and leapt forward to catch hold of the bamboo frame. Being a black belter in his school days, it was easy for him. He remembered once Radhika had said that in the newly constructed ‘H’ Block, a balcony had been added on the second floor. He climbed on to it and turned left.

Lo and behold, the balcony was right in front.

A somersault and he was on the terrace-cum-balcony of the ‘H’ block of Queen’s Castle.

The door was locked from outside, but that was the only entrance into the hostel *illegally*. The corridor windows were directly in front of the rooms of the first-year students, but the risk was not worth taking lest he got suspended from the college.

But luck favoured him. In the hope of finding something to help open the lock, he searched through the pockets of his cargo pants. He found an unused old hairpin Radhika had once given him after removing it from her head. He bent one of the pointed tips to 35 degrees and the other to 40 degrees and slid into the lock. Few variations of the angles and it worked like a charm. His endeavour proved successful and the lock turned open.

‘Finally! I am here...’

He called Radhika. She was shocked as well as overjoyed at his presence. Fear was the last thing on her mind as she rushed to meet him.

“*Shhh*...it’s just 12:30, most of the girls would be awake. I will go first, check for any bird flying around and then call you up.”

They traversed through the adjacent dark and bright corners of the lanes of Queen’s Castle with Apurv holding his Woodland in his hand, which used to creak with a non-musical sound. While Radhika took the lead to escort him, he enjoyed himself. He was the only warrior who had defied the strict although now non-existent girls’ hostel security. The elation at his victory gave him an unusual high. So many girls walking around in their minimal clothes – it was an absolute paradise. He then shifted his focus to Radhika who was above all, looking the hottest among them in her black nightgown reaching till the middle of her thighs. His thoughts were broken when Radhika indicated him to stop. He took the side of a wall along one of the darkest corners as he heard Radhika talk to someone.

“Hey Radhs! You are alone. I thought you were talking to someone,” Rashmi said with a confused look.

“Oh! I was talking to Apurv and the loudspeaker got on.”

Convinced, Rashmi smiled and went past her.

Radhika linked her hand into Apurv’s and in a few minutes the door of Radhika’s room banged close. Now they were safe, secure and alone.

“Why have you put so many posters? I am the real hero of your life.”

“Huh! You are nothing in comparison to them.”

“I challenge nobody can kiss the way I can...”

“I accept your challenge...” she replied with sensuality in her voice.

Apurv lifted her up, pushing against the poster-covered wall and kissed her hungrily, taking her into his embrace. This was

the first time they were kissing each other without having to stop in between to check if anyone was watching.

Radhika switched on the Linkin Park, so that in the noise of the music, their voices would go unheard.

“You know, you look more beautiful without your makeup and you are looking very sexy in this short nightgown. Wish I could watch you every day in this,” said Apurv, partly managing to complete his whole sentence while kissing Radhika, who in acceptance kissed him back. And again they were locked, lips over lips.

Apurv again murmured, “Hey, you know, I can write a book, *My Journey through Queen’s Castle*.”

Radhika pushed him back, “If you have only to talk, we could have done it over the phone. Why the hell did you take such a huge risk?”

“Oh, Miss Radhika Sharma, getting desperate!”

“Shut up! I am not. I am scared,” she blushed a bit.

“I won't let you think anything except me, so there won't be any scope of fear in your mind. Enjoy this moment Radhs. It's not every day that we will be together, alone and without any intervention.”

Apurv put his fingers through her hair, bringing her close to himself and brushing her lips, gently kissed her on her eyes. He brought his lips close to her ears so that no words would escape out of them.

“Radhs, you are the most beautiful girl I have ever met, not because you are hot and sexy, but because I love you. I crave for nothing else in life the way I do for you.”

With both of them breathing heavily, Radhika barely heard what he was saying but surely felt each of his words. She held his head and pressed it below her neck.

“It feels so nice to hear your heartbeat,” said Apurv, moving his head up and looking directly into Radhika’s eyes.

Their lips pressed against other’s again and Apurv said, “I love to hear you breathe...”

This was the end of their talking. Apurv kissed on her neck and getting a little lower, kissed her on her cleavage, outlining her spheres with his fingers. He pulled off one side of her dress as Radhika helped him with the other one, followed by unbuttoning his shirt. He undid her garments and hugged her tightly and whispered in her ears, “I always thought that this would be an out-of-the-world feeling when your nipples would be pressed against my chest, but now I think, it’s even better. I have no words to describe it.”

Breathing heavily, Radhika kissed his ear and then biting it she said, “Don’t search for words now.”

Holding her softly, he kissed all over her neck. Then slid his hands down to her navel. He could feel the hot, soft skin. He laid her over the hostel bed – a bed not even enough for one person, but then it was more than enough for both of them – he bent down and kissed her navel, moistening the area around it. Then moving his hands around her back, slid them down and squeezed her butts. Radhika gasped with ecstasy. He looked at her, lying completely inuiting. His eyes followed her curvaceous body. He thought, ‘She belongs to me; she is mine now forever.’

His fingers circled around the navel and moved across her waist. His fingers followed her drops of sweat. With a sensation flowing like lava, he felt her ready to accept him. Pressing his body against her, they fused into each other. At that moment, no feeling of insecurity troubled Radhika. She felt possessed by Apurv and protected in his embrace.

Both of them were filled with a unique sense of belonging – belonging to each other.

How tender they were at times, how resistive at other; how possessive, hurting, powerful, insecure and loving they were at different times. They lived every emotion to their extreme and in the process discovered each other, understanding themselves better.

You may have heard about it from your friends, seen it in movies, read about it and it's always on your mind but nothing is comparable to the real feeling, which is simply unimaginable.

Radhika realised it wasn't physical; it was love.

Apurv realised that he hadn't made love to a girl; he had deepened his love for the girl he loved.

She fell asleep in his arms. He left a note for her not wanting to disturb her in sleep.

*To,*

*Radhs,*

*You burn flames inside me which only you have the power to kindle. Your lips to me are the most desirable things in this world. I would love to hold you tightly and put my arms around you. Wish I could stay like that forever while your strands of hair brushed against my cheeks.*

*Love you passionately,*

*Love you forever,*

*Apurv*

**...LOVE ROCKS!**

*You won't be able to live after parting from me.  
You will come to know it some time.  
It won't be possible to forget me ever, you go anywhere...*

## Wit Beyond Measure

Amidst the roar of 130 students seated on the first day of the preplacement training, Shastri, the director of the placement cell entered and shouted, "Silence. This may be the behaviour you show in your class, but I won't allow it here. Is this what your parents sent you here for? Is this what you expected of yourself when you first entered this college? Think about what you have become in all these years. What have you gained? Rather, for most of you, what you have lost. You can't even solve twenty aptitude questions in thirty minutes, not because you don't have the capability to do so, but because you all are busy looking at what others are doing and looking for a chance to cheat. Does the person sitting beside you know more than you? In this class of 130 students, 80 per cent of you want to do something in your lives. Then also, the whole class is ruled by the remaining 20 per cent. Hey you, the one in the pink shirt, are you regular in your classes?" he pointed at Sandeep.

"Yes sir, I am."

Roars of laughter boomed in the class; even Sandeep joined.

"See, this is the scenario. Your answer made others laugh and even you joined in it. Are you all going to behave this way when a company comes for recruitment? They won't pull you up for cheating and reprimand you. They will just give you the question and leave. Your ethics and merit will be counted then." He went out, leaving them with a disgusted look.



Everybody sat silently over what he had said and turned serious. Pindrop silence reigned.

Within minutes, the situation was back to what it was before he had entered the room. Everybody (here stress is on *everybody* as there was no exception) waited impatiently for attendance to get over so they could take coffee from the canteen before the hostel-entry time.

Placement was an object of humour for the seniors (obviously before recession).

“Last year a company came for recruiting the electrical and mechanical guys. During the written round, with no supervisors around, give and take was rampant. Seeing that all answers were similar, the company blacklisted our college!” said a fourth-year student, conveying some information to a junior.

Another narrated a better anecdote. He said, “In a TeeSeeEss interview, an IT girl was asked how to prepare *idli sambhar*. We don’t even know that! Think what would have happened in our case!”

All the males present burst out laughing.

The teachers asked, “Students don’t study. Hence, why will we call the core companies?”

The students’ response was, “Why the fuck do we need to study, if core companies are not called for recruitment?”

Pre-placement training started, gradually increasing in time and complexity. Radhika had her own woes, “It always happens to me. I start everything earlier than others, but end up losing the goal. I never attain it. I wonder if leaving CAT for an uncertain GMAT was a good idea! What if I end up getting nowhere? What if CAT hasn’t been a bad decision and it was a mistake to choose a tempting option over the conventional?”

“Have some *badam*-shake, you will feel good. We will succeed together, fly much higher than others,” Apurv said, knowing the key to control her mood.

He thought, 'Unlike us, these girls don't need a solution. So long as you just keep on listening to them and discussing their problems, they will be fine. Even some good suggestions don't help much as they have something else already planned in life.'

His principle was clear and he succeeded in cooling her down with the iced drink.

\* \* \* \* \*

Further they romanced with GMAT. The exam was on a Tuesday.

"Best of luck to you," a nervous Radhika said.

"Same to you. I love you. We have to do it," replied Apurv as they entered their respective cubicles.

The computer adaptive test was three-and-half-hours long.

Minutes sped faster than the Mach 3, while Apurv and Radhika battled the quantitative, verbal and analytical writing assessment sections on their computer terminals.

"Apurv! I got a 748!" Radhika came running out, squealing with joy.

Apurv hugged her.

"Congrats! I got a meager 638. Now you will leave me and enter some hi-fi school. What will happen to me now?" he teased.

"There is a year left for improving your profile and grade points. Then we can go together to one of the best universities!"

Scorecards were ready, profile was perfect. Another few months at college and soon the application along with a transcript and references had to be sent to different universities, as a penultimate step to their goal.

*If it ever comes to you, then look back at once...  
Someone would be waiting for you.  
Even if you love or not,  
Someone would be loving you...*

## Final Countdown

Commencement of final year of college brought relief at having survived three years of rigorous classes, exam schedules, nagging teachers, sleepwalking to the class, night outs during exams, pressure of getting placed and what not interspersed with moments of friendship when lending books, studying together during exams, escaping from the hostel for night outs, discos, birthday bashes, dancing out together in the first rain and all kinds of learning experiences; some moments of fights, jealousy; a few moments of advice and just being there for each other; and SOME MOMENTS OF LOVE, ROMANCE.

And innumerable moments like these made the building blocks of life – their college life.

This was the place where they came to know about their real self, their aspirations, their capabilities, incapacities, value of friendship, importance of love, what life is and how to make it worthwhile.

It was a journey that involved maximum transitions and transformations – Being ragged in the first year; conducting ragging in the second year; serving as the anti-ragging squad in the fourth year; mugging up teachers' notes in first and second years just for the sake of CGPA; developing aptitude and personality in the third year and then thinking as to how to start climbing the corporate ladder.

Here they learnt the way other boys and girls checked out each other as freshers – chatting, requesting, creating a list of friends among girls and boys while having coffee in respective groups.

Here they got bound in unbounded relationships – some relationships survived the test of time, and others got carried by the ‘ups and downs’ of the tidal waves of time before losing their existence.

Here Radhika and Apurv learnt something larger than life – from living for themselves to learning to live for someone else.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Someone they love...**

Apurv climbed over the bench and took a view of the college, shouting aloud, *‘I LOVE MY COLLEGE.’*

Radhika asked in a similar tone, “What makes you feel so?”

Apurv hollered, “I don’t know. I mean people have so many complaints that mess food gives a nauseating feeling, wi-fi speed always sucks, college is not giving us proper exposure, but I do not regret living here. It’s my home, it’s my life.”

He knelt down towards Radhika and shouted in her ears, “Love my college.”

“Okay, fine you can come here once every month,” shouted this time a slightly irritated Radhika into his ear.

“No, that’s not required,” a sudden change came in Apurv’s tone. He jumped down and nestled close to Radhika to embrace her.

“You know why? Because what’s makes our college this beautiful is the fact that I met you here. We spent so many unforgettable moments here – you are the one because of whom the college became my life and if I had met you anywhere else, then that place would have been the most amazing place for me in this whole universe. And I won’t rue not being able to stay in

this college longer because I will depart from here and get the most precious thing I can cherish throughout my whole life. Do you hear me? That's you. We are going to be together for the end of time. Now nothing can keep us apart." He paused, breathed and continued in a softer tone.

"To make somebody fall in love with yourself is a bigger job than merely loving someone. The way you used to freak out every three months citing strange reasons for not staying committed – like our unsuitability to each other, my goodness! I think I have done a pretty good job in stabilising you and getting my career on track while making you fall in love again and again. Don't I deserve a gold medal for that?" Apurv said, putting his arms around Radhika.

"No gold medal" she kissed him. "It was not that I wanted to trouble you or get rid of you; it was just that things were not going well that time. We were not getting good grades; we were not working for our future; we both had education loans on our heads and no idea about the future. I always aspired to go for an MBA – it had to be my final degree in life. I did not want anything to come in my way, especially your casual attitude and saying everything would get alright, when it is not a fairy-tale. In the real world, things get alright only when you work for them, and above all, I didn't want to interfere in your career. I mean it's your life and you had the right to spend it the way you wanted – maybe study further and do an MBA. I simply did not want to pressurise you for that."

Apurv replied, "But see, we have a great CGPA, a great profile with certificates in various disciplines; we have got placed in good companies; our MBA profiles are shaping up good. We have got everything that we wanted and I will try my best to get into the same MBA college after this. It is really hard to spend even a single second without you. How will I spend two whole years without even catching a glimpse of you?"

“We got these things only after spending twelve hours a day in the reading room, taking part in every event taking place, burning night oil. It would be a God-granted wish if we get together after this. But, even if we don’t, we know we are always there for each other and this short separation is nothing in comparison to the future we will earn after that – a future together.

“You keep saying that you are always with me, but see, you are leaving tomorrow. Why is your cousin marrying so early? Anyways, why can’t she call me along with you? The next wedding will be ours and it would be good to get acquainted with your whole family now,” Apurv said triumphantly.

“No big deal. I grant you the permission to try out the other girls. Don’t worry, your time will pass fine,” chuckled Radhika.

Later she packed her stuff for the wedding and Apurv got mentally ready to face the remaining fifteen days of college without her. Never before in college had she left him for so many days.

He came to her hostel, “This is for my dearest Radhika!” he said and gifted her a packet. She opened it spontaneously, removing the ribbons neatly stuck with cellotape. “Wow! Had you read my mind or what? Such a pretty *lehenga*! Thank you, honey!”

“Just make sure you compete with my sister-in-law,” said a chuckling Apurv.

“I will...” Radhika said happily, “...such a beautiful piece of artwork would make her run for her money...” They kissed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Radhika moved forward for the security check. She turned back, waved to Apurv and said “Bye, take care.”

Apurv watched her going to check in. Something struck his mind and he shouted from behind, “And...I love you...”

It was too late as she was already out of hearing range. Apurv sighed. Through the glass window he watched the Boeing take off.

‘I will miss you...*Bon voyage!!*’ he softly said and left the airport.

‘I wish, I could see her dance in that *lehenga*. How beautiful she would look! Fifteen days seem impossible. I feel empty without her. Why couldn’t she take me along, going to a distant land?’ Thinking all the way about Radhika and the times they had spent together, he returned to his hostel.

‘Fifteen days is not a long time, it will pass in a jiffy,’ he tried to convince himself every few minutes.

He took a shower and decided to complete the rest of his Java and database project. His room-mates had left on an industrial visit, leaving him alone in the room, devoid of any human presence.

Apurv switched on his laptop and resumed his work on IDE. ‘Java is so cool and yet so powerful. No wonder, it has become so popular,’ he thought.

He ran his eyes on Google Gadget sidebar to have a look at the news updates and RSS feeds.

#### NEWS 1

Zech Chahindra acquired Vatyam for Rs 1700 crores.

[\(Click for more\)](#)

He smiled to himself.

#### NEWS 2

Election campaigns: Congress spokesperson on principles of Rajiv Gandhi and the new youth icon, Rahul Gandhi.

[\(Click for more\)](#)

He wasn’t interested.

### NEWS3

Air India skyliner to Malaysia crashes over Bay of Bengal just after takeoff. All feared dead.

(Click for more)

### NEWS4

Cricket: IPL League going to start in Johannesburg.

(Click for more)

Apurv froze. Numbness spread inside him. He sank back in his chair, numb with shock.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was havoc all around at the airport. The security staff were trying to control the crowd. Everyone seemed in despair. Crying parents and wailing wives demanded information about their loved ones from the information centre. Apurv made his way through the crowd towards the inquiry counter, "Can you please tell me about Miss Radhika Sharma? Is she okay?"

"How many times will I have to tell Mr? Listen, rescue teams have been deployed. The air traffic control has not been able to contact the pilot. Everyone is feared dead. It will be God's grace if the survivors are found. No one stands a chance though; the engine blew off at 40,000 feet." Those words poured like hot lava on his ears. He fell to his knees with angst and pain, whispering to himself, 'It can't be happening, it's unbelievable. She can't leave me like this. I can still feel her presence, and she is here. It is some kind of nightmare. I dropped her here only a few hours back.' He closed his eyes and saw Radhika's face – she was smiling to him. She came close to him and kissed him on his forehead. Taking his hand in hers, she raised him up.

But when he opened his eyes, it was a mere hallucination; a sweet dream. People everywhere were crying in the chaos and Radhika, nowhere to be seen or felt.



He fell down again. Mobile in one hand, he made futile attempts to dial her number. 'Pinching hurts. What is happening? God, tell me it's not for real.' He slapped himself – it hurt – in order to reassure his own existence.

'I cannot live without Radhika. She is in my senses, on my breath. She is my life; she runs through my veins. My world starts with her and ends with her. Oh heavens, this should not happen.' Tears flowed down his cheeks.

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PART II  
*C'est le vie...*  
Such is life...

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*Two sides of a river will meet some day...  
Our heart's boat battling the storm will reach the shore some  
day...  
If pursuit to unite exists in hearts,  
We will definitely confront each other some day.*

## The Memoir

*"I am worried like hell, whether you really want to stay with me or not, whether you love me or loathe me? Do you need me or not? Every time your answer changes. I can't figure out what to do? Sometimes your answers are out of anger, but otherwise you say you love me. But when you point at negativity in our relationship, you just go on. Do you want to continue or discontinue with the relationship?"*

*I will act accordingly. Apurv gave a weary glance at Radhika.*

*"Yeah, Apurv, this is good. Again your typical question?" Radhika raised her hands in disapproval.*

*"Again irrelevant. Just answer me if you require me in your life or not? And if you do then, why? If we stay together, then we can deal with other problems you have with me later..." Apurv interrupted in between.*

*"It always happens like this only. We get into a fight for some reason or other and then you raise this silly question whether you want to stay with me or not? And I get trapped. If I say 'yes', then you will say that basically we want to stay together, so let's not fight over petty things. And after that all my complaints go down the drain. If I say 'no', then you will say what's the point in fighting? In both cases nothing changes and you remain just the way you are and the relationship sucks."*

*“You adhere to the prerequisites of the relationship and then expect me to take care of you. The most important prerequisite is that you need me in your life. If you don’t want me, don’t expect anything from me. Simply split up.”*

*A few seconds passed without looking at each other. A few more moments passed without uttering a single word. A few minutes passed just listening to each other breathe.*

*Radhika took a step forward, brushed her fingers through Apurv’s hair and gave him a sheet of A-4 paper. Apurv wiped away his tear-filled eyes to see what was written. All he could see was a sketch of a Christian wedding with the bride leaning on the bridegroom’s arm before bending over to kiss her. A smile stretched across Apurv’s lips.*

*Radhika smiled and he locked his eyes into hers.*

*“I made it during the holidays. Actually I thought I will make hundreds of similar sketches and will start sending them to you in future till I think that it’s high time you proposed to me.”*

*Their laugh crackled on each other’s ears. Her body knelt over his, her hair brushing his shoulders, their eyes flashed into each other before getting too heavy to be kept open. Apurv lifted her up at her waist and then locked his lips into hers.*

*“Radhs, sweetheart! You are my most beautiful imagination. I have always imagined kissing you, taking you in my arms, hugging you and loving you more than I could. I have always thought of the feel and sensation when my lips would touch yours, when I would hold you by your waist and pull you towards me and then never let you go. I would just hug you and love you the whole day. Now, whenever we fight, I miss embracing you.”*

*Radhika gave half a smile.*

*“Something is really wicked about your smile,” Apurv replied through a confused smile.*

*Radhika brought her lips close to his ears and whispered swiftly, “Let’s split up.”*

*"What?"*

*"Yeah, you heard me correct."*

*"Why you are saying this now?"*

*"Coz if we would have split half an hour earlier, you would have remembered me like the evil Radhika – a Radhika who shouts at you, who forces you to do everything as it pleases her. After a few months, you would have never thought of the nice changes I have brought in your life. Maybe you would be happy if all these chaos is kept away from you. You would have never regretted not having me in your life, but now, if we get apart, you will always remember what you have lost."*

The last line chimed loud and clear, "You will always remember what you have lost."

Apurv sat in the corner of a dimly-lit corridor. He leaned against the wall with his head bowed low. A storm was raging inside him, in his mind and body. His insides were on fire. With Radhika gone, time had stopped for him. He lifted his head and repeated, 'I will always remember what I lost.'

'Have a puff, buddy. You will feel better. This is exactly what you need now. Your insides need ice. This will help you.' Someone offered.

The news of the accident spread like wildfire and futile consolations in all forms poured in for Apurv. Even the known 'bad guys' tried to get him out of his desolation. Apurv raised his head and nodded in refusal.

"I don't need it, I don't need any of your support. It's my life. I will see, fuck off."

"Try it once, you will feel better," his bearded friend, Rounik, offered again.

Just to shoo him off, Apurv yelled, "Give me the lighter," although he cried to himself silently, 'I don't need it'. Apurv's

insides battled within, each taking him in a different direction. He gave in to the darker side.

His hand, much against his soul, ignited the stick.

“Isn’t it good, buddy?” Rounik’s lips spread in a crooked smile.

“Yeah, I can barely speak and you call it good?” Apurv fell down coughing, his body becoming numb and eyes red. Pain and ecstasy entwined inside him.

“You need to give it a chance. Take another slowly; you will get along with it.”

“Get up, Apurv,” Shantanu pulled him up, helping him get to his feet. “It’s been hours you have been here. Get up. You have classes to attend, work to do and commitments to keep.”

“What commitments? My world is devastated. There is no one to keep the commitments for.”

A dishevelled Apurv, somehow with Shantanu’s help, reached the class. His dazed state distracted many; professors’ empathy turned into apathy and he was thrown out of the class.

His classmates saw him stumble out of the class. Shantanu thought, ‘I got’ta do something about him, otherwise Apurv won’t return to the real world.’

“Aunty, Apurv is in my room,” Shantanu said, directing Apurv’s parents followed by hostel friends of Apurv through the alleys of KP5.

Shantanu’s room-mate Ashish rushed ahead of the group to hide the empty bottles and burnt ends.

“Apurv, just cannot accept the fact that Radhika is not here,” said Shantanu, ushering them into his room. Apurv lay spread-eagled, half dangling from the bed. Suddenly, seeing his parents, he tried to get up but fell down weakly. His Dad rushed forward to hold him. He could feel the pain and agony. Holding his only son in arms in that condition, he looked at his wife.

“Let me talk to him,” she went close to Apurv.

Not able to bear the scene, Apurv’s Dad left the room towards the verandah, signalling Shantanu to join him. Walking out, he heard him say, “No need to worry about anything. We are here with you...”

“We cannot leave Apurv in this condition. Let him be at home for a month, until he becomes normal,” said Apurv’s Dad, looking towards the barren fields outside. Shantanu agreed with him.

\* \* \* \* \*

*“Hey I have become eighteen today. By Indian law, I am eligible to get married now,” Radhika winked, turning towards others.*

*“Grab anyone and run,” Ankita shouted!*

*Others joined in.*

*“But I will have to catch someone who is twenty-one or above. Oh, my poor baby, Apurv, you have missed the chance,” giggled Radhika, moving towards Apurv and hugging him with the whole group shouting, “Birthday bumps!”*

*“No one will touch my Radhika. I have special birthday bumps for her, eighteen kisses in a row.”*

*The others oohed and aahed!*

“Apurv, how many times will you watch that video? Come for dinner,” said Mom with apparent affection in her voice.

Apurv reached the dining hall mechanically and unaware of his surroundings, just stared at the food. The hopeless eyes of his father stared at Apurv before glancing at his wife as if asking what had happened to their son.

Apurv’s mother gave him a reassuring look and went towards him, saying, “Today, my son will eat from my hand...”

She eagerly started talking to him while serving him in between. She used to do the same when he was five-years old.

When he avoided food, she used to befool him by making him gulp while talking so that he would not notice it.

No one of his age could get such an opportunity of being fed by his mother, but Apurv's eyes did not reflect the love being bestowed on him. She accidentally fed him a green chilli, but Apurv gobbled up the chilli without even noticing it. She felt very sorry for him. He silently left the room and this was the last straw for his parents, who broke down, weeping loudly.

"You remember when he was five, he had hidden pieces of fish under a pillow because I was not frying cutlets for him? He is not the same now; he is not at all the same. He neither insists on anything, nor makes any demands – no want, no hope, no belief," she sobbed. The tears flowing outside were nothing compared to the grief inside. Hope was what was required for Apurv; not consolations. "He is a living body with a dead soul. He never laughs, never cries, he is a stone. He can't feel anything. I want my son back. I can't see him like this," mourned his Mom in the arms of his father.

Even his father expressed his agony, "What sin have we committed to see our only son become indifferent to life? At the age of 50, when people start relying on their children and think about a solitary retreat, we have a son who neither has a present nor a future. My fate has inflicted this grief on me when I have to teach him a reason to live and give strength to fight with his destiny."

"Apurv *bhaiya*, we will all have to learn to live without her. We can't alter destiny. You have to get on with your life," Radhika's younger sister tried to console Apurv to the best of her ability.

Apurv looked away, "The last possibility of her being alive is gone."



“I have something for you. She was making it for your birthday. Though it is advised never to gift an unfinished art to someone, I thought it may be invaluable for you.”

Apurv unfolded it. A sketch of a couple holding hands and walking down the street delighted the senses and evoked emotional admiration. Apurv exclaimed, “How can she pen it down directly from our dreams? A rainy-day walk in the streets of Athens.”

While parting Shruti made an effort to lift his spirits, “Hey bro, you are still in great shape. You can always find a great girl. Let’s see, I am also not bad.”

Apurv smiled at the attempts of an eleventh grader to provide solace, “That would be my dream come true.”

Both of them laughed and both of them cried.

On returning home, his Dad talked of the given promise. “Apurv, nothing is everlasting. With every step, life changes its meaning and keeping in mind the past will mean your life has come to a standstill. College will help you mobilise it. Time is the greatest healer; allow it to do its bit.”

His Mom took charge, “We have informed Shantanu; he is coming to take you back tomorrow.”

Apurv had no power to resist; he simply followed. Shantanu and his group stood surrounding Apurv in front of ‘Juice Point’.

“Buck up dude! We all are with you. A year full of fun and a long life lies ahead. Radhika was not everything...”

“She was the only thing,” snapped Apurv “There is no future, no meaning, without her. Meaning has lost its future and future, its meaning.”

Friends tried to bring Apurv back on track. But time has its value for everyone, as time passed, their focus gradually shifted from Apurv, back to their own lives. Life moved on as usual for

them, with the loss of Radhika buried in the debris of time. But the wound remained fresh in Apurv; fresh as yesterday.

A vacuum was created in his life which had become devoid of love, friends, feelings and emotions. Nimisha tried to fill in the void, but Apurv voluntarily or involuntarily never allowed her.

He moved aimlessly without any destination and flooded by memories of Radhika. Those benches and lawns where they sat and chatted whole day long in every centre and corner of their beautiful campus, now looked forlorn and deserted. He heard the echo of their laughter in the corridor and often stopped in front of the electronics classroom, waiting for Radhika to come out after the class got over. Everybody passed by, casting a glance at him before looking away. Radhika was everywhere. His coming back didn't help in his recovery but rendered him more lonesome.

*"The guy is shouting so loudly; seems, he is quarrelling over something; looks like the girl is pissed off with him. She left him alone, see," Radhika nudges him to look at them.*

*"Oh! Leave them. What have you got to do with them? Why don't you concentrate on us?" Apurv snapped, thinking, 'Why do these girls concern themselves with what is going on in the other's life?'*

*"The girl is going. How can you miss it?"*

*Apurv turned around and said, "It is simple – if the guy takes out his mobile and dials, that means they have had a fight and the girl has left him, showing attitude."*

*The guy took out his mobile and punched some numbers on it. Apurv and Radhika burst out laughing*

*"Even I can bet what happens next. The girl will return in a few minutes."*

*Apurv and Radhika waited for some time to check whether his prophecy would come true. True to his verdict, the girl returned in a few minutes. Radhika asked, surprised, "What next?"*

*"They will sit far apart. Only the girl will speak and the guy will listen."*

*When girlfriend is angry, she is always right! Girlfriends are like ticking time bombs. Eventually the action followed.*

*Radhika amazed, asked, "How did you know this?"*

*"Do I have any less experience of this?"*

*"See, Radhika, that same junior couple," an elated Apurv pointed to Radhika. He returned to reality with a jolt where there was no Radhika nearby.*

A broken-hearted Apurv drifted around before sitting down beneath the tree, where he always used to wait for her, in front of the girls' hostel. Melancholy seeped into him as he remembered the aura she emitted when emerging out of the hostel – sometimes as a queen with a positive radiance on her face, sometimes giggling, dressed tomboyishly; sometimes with a killer smile matching a black, sexy gown. When she came out, the gloomy pathway shone a glorious light and became lifeless when she departed.

Apurv seemed to be lost in the past, 'Won't she ever come out of that place?' he thought.

But he was disquieted by the member of 'SWAT' gangs swanking past him – all displaying the theme of Harley Davidson with chains hanging from multiple pockets, coloured hair and earrings, bracelets and tattoos and gazing at every single spot of pink and cream of the feminine building.

"My goodness! What a beauty!" exclaimed Max, obstructing the path of a second-year student.

"Have inherited it from your father, you bastard?" the girl hissed out.

“Gone are your days, Max!” scoffed the others in the group. One of the guys glared at Apurv and said, “Hey, Dev, get him.”

“What have you got to do with him? He is lost in his own world,” smirked Dev, stretching his arms.

“Just want him to get lost in ours.”

All the wrongdoers have got some nerve. Dev had his beneath his skin.

Second time, Apurv coughed out smoke, 3<sup>rd</sup> .., 5<sup>th</sup> .., 17<sup>th</sup>.. time till the smoke finding its way through his nostrils.

“Hey guys, I am backing off,” Apurv averred.

“Don’t leave. We gon’na hit the streets tonight. Speakers have already been loaded. We have a huge party in the lane. Everything will be gone there. Everything includes everything,” Saz winked.

“I just don’t feel like...”

Saz obstructed his way, “Not for friends even?”

“Okay, will do it some other time.”

He drifted through the streets with eyes fixed to the ground, avoiding everything which could make him recall Radhika. He collided with Nimisha.

“Watch out, Apurv!”

“What are you doing here, Nim?”

“Just came to get the notes xeroxed. Exams are approaching, but what the hell are you doing with those guys? The whole college knows what they are. Cigarettes, drinks, drugs, mobile, laptops scam – all with what their name can be associated with them, but not you.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Yeah, this is how you are taking care of yourself? You are not attending classes, you have been debarred in two papers. I am sure you won’t even be knowing from which date the exams

begin. Engrossed in your world the whole day long, you just stray with these jerks. You don't even know what shit they will get you into."

"I don't need your sympathy. Radhika was always correct – you have this dirty quality of clinging to others," Apurv walked passed her.

Nimisha, with tears in her eyes, whispered, "Even your Radhika would have told you the same because both of us have one thing in common."

*Stole eyes from whom, heart collided with the one.  
Authorised love to whom, got grievances for life from the one...  
I didn't even quench to whom,  
received promises of enmity from the one.*

## Is Morality Really Made of Morons?

Saz was right. The streets and the buildings reverberated as the music thumped out from quad 10K-watt speakers. Lasers and globes revolved at everyone. Approachable girls in their minimal clothes, boobs pressed against chests and hands squeezing the hips and in many cases, groins colliding to raise the heat and send the temperature soaring, with smoke erupting from lighted tobacco sticks.

He looked at Apurv who was gulping down a bottle after bottle. "How long this jerk had refused to come, but finally I have got him here."

Saz banged on Apurv's back, "Dude, there are more earthly pleasures than this. Check her out."

Saz diverted his vision towards the shining poles.

Beauty and cleavage – both were in abundance. A throbbing 36-24-36 in skimpy drape was baring more than just her milky thighs. The movement of her mountains was enough to drive 'average' men wild, but Apurv felt no response. To elevate his mood, Saz told Apurv the difference in the designs of the panties in the 1960s and the 2000s, "Then panties had to be separated to see the ass, but now, asses have to be separated to see the panties."

The bombshell was one of the 2000 kind. Some people even clapped till she dropped her covers. More than a single hand was required for continuing that. Though the booze got better off him, Apurv uttered, "I want my Radhika."

'This son'uvabitch won't change. Was hers deeper than the other's?' Saz thought exasperatedly "I know what you want," Saz smirked, taking out 100 ug of LSD from his pocket.

"This bastard is costing a lot," Dev said, giving a concerned look.

"He is worth a lot more."

"*Vous prendre ce;* have this," Saz handed a sugar cube to the dazed Apurv. "She will teach you even the French kiss. *Bon voyage.*"

The initial effect led to a sense of euphoria and dizziness. Apurv embarked on a journey to the point-of-no-return.

Hallucinations began to occur, striking down the barriers around him. He felt detached from his ego, crossing different states of consciousness. His perceptions altered and words lost their meaning. His condition began to assume threatening proportions – everything in his field of vision wavered and got distorted. His surroundings now transformed themselves in more terrifying ways. Everything in the room spun around and the familiar objects and pieces of furniture assumed grotesque, threatening forms. They seemed to be in a continuous motion, animated, as if driven by an inner restlessness. He looked again at the bombshell. She was no longer a pole dancer; rather a malevolent, insidious witch with a coloured mask.

Apurv tried to control himself, "Am I perceiving demonic transformation in myself, in my inner being? Why is my every attempt to put an end to the disintegration of the outer world and the dissolution of my ego seem to be a wasted effort? A demon has invaded me, taking possession of my body, mind, and soul."

He jumped up and screamed, trying to free himself from the demon. But soon he sank down again and lay helpless on the sofa. "It is a demon that is scornfully triumphing over my will." He was being seized by the dreadful fear of going insane. "I am

being taken to another world, another place, another time.” At times he believed himself to be outside his body, and as an outside observer, he realised the complete tragedy of his own situation. “My body seems to be without sensation, lifeless and strange. Am I being forced to leave this world prematurely? Am I dying? Whose façade is this? Somebody is pulling me away. Is that you, Radhika? It seems as if the horror is softening, giving way to a feeling of good fortune and gratitude; to normal perceptions and pleasant thoughts.”

He became more confident on feeling that the danger of insanity had got replaced by levitation. A sensation of well-being and renewed life flowed through him, giving him extraordinary pleasure. The world seemed as if newly created.

\* \* \* \* \*

Apurv sprang up. There was no Radhika by his side. His bubble of euphoria exploded. Searching frantically, breathless, he looked for Radhika, but realised that his journey to Radhika’s world was a deliberate attempt at deviating from reality.

Though still somewhat tired physically, he felt an inner satisfaction. He fumbled to find his cell and called, “Hello Saz, I need it.”

Apurv was not the only one who was satisfied. “I knew you will,” replied Saz casually “Come to Engineer Point and I will help you out.”

‘With his defences down, Apurv has finally bit the bait,’ the thought succeeded a wining smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Classes and studies went down the gutter for Apurv. The feeling of the sun shining after the spring rain made everything glisten and sparkle in fresh light and the journey through ecstasy with Radhika minimised all other fears in life.



“We need money, buddy; there is no free lunch. Resources have exhausted and I cannot sustain you any more,” Saz said, giving a disappointed look and crocodile tears.

“How much?”

“It’s 10 bucks per hit.”

“You will have it.”

Apurv departed. His pocket money was a meagre amount in comparison to ‘the amount’ he required, but he managed for some days. But as they say, nothing is everlasting, Apurv had to face bankruptcy. He had crossed the point of no return, but he needed it for survival – survival after Radhika. There was no going back, cash or not. The offering to longing got transformed into begging,

“Please, try to understand, I can’t live without it.”

“No mon, no fun. Sell off your belongings.”

Apurv needn’t require any other advice. Before he knew, his laptop, iPod, cell phones, shoes were auctioned, with the only marketable item left – his watch. Apurv thought, looking at it, ‘It’s Rado; must be worth at least 30 grand; enough for a month’s supply. Radhika had gifted this to me. It has always been so precious for me. I have never parted from it. How can I sell it now? There must be some way. I have to resist the urge. I can’t afford hits every day.’

A month flew by in a flicker of the eyelids. His stock finished. He decided to make do with alcohol.

Roaming and swaying in the campus, he looked towards the sky and silently spoke to the invisible Radhika, ‘Waiting for you, thinking of you, thinking of the time we spent together, missing you as I think of your cute smile, missing you more when I remember your poise, missing you as I think of your ever beautiful expressions, missing you as I remember your cute voice saying, ‘Radhs wants Apurv’.’”

Tears rolled down his face. He staggered through the narrow lanes of the campus, expressing his grief vocally, “Missing the melody of your laugh which I could hear over the phone; missing the *mehndi*-clad nimble hands to kiss upon; missing the soft eyes that looked at me so lovingly; missing the intelligent head that rested upon my shoulders; missing your shadow which accompanied mine on the long roads; missing your touch; missing the feel of your soft palms; missing you terribly. Thinking of you as I remember how cute, beautiful and fairylike you looked when you slept. Kissed you on your eyes Please come to me, I love you sweetheart; I am feeling empty without you beside me. I want my sweetheart right now, right here.”

Apurv tried to walk but was unable to control his movements and fell down in a deep dark corner.

Nimisha saw him in that pathetic condition and tried to get him up. “Apurv! Apurv...” she called. “What have you done to yourself?” She nestled beside him. Silent tears flowed from the corner of her eyes.

“Radhs, Radhs,” a fuddled Apurv longed for his Radhs.

“For the first time I regret Radhs not being here with you,” she whispered in his ears, “I know I was never as beautiful as Radhika, but I always cared for you. I always thought about you, observed you, but you never did.”

Nimisha helped Apurv rest on the cemented wall and thought, ‘My love lies helpless.’

Nimisha bent down and sat down beside him. Her fingers slipped through his hair and holding him, she whispered silently to an unconscious Apurv, ‘I have always loved you. Wish you were mine.’

She drew closer and parting her lips, she kissed on Apurv’s. Her other hand rested on his waist. Tugging him slightly towards herself, she hugged him tightly. The night covered them. Her

dream had come true and she made no effort to resist them. Her lips pressed on his, her gloss feeling the edge of his lips.

Although Apurv smelled like an old beer bar, it didn't bother her. Holding him tight, as if never to let him go, she rested her head slowly on his chest. It was the night of her life.

\* \* \* \* \*

They say nobody can save one from his fate. It is written. Written in Apurv's that his addiction would rip off his senses, and it did happen. The other acid people in hostel suggested stealing. Stealing is old fashioned but it always works. It was quite common in the boys' hostel and had even had made its way into the girls' hostel.

"You can easily get some laptops and mobiles. I have connections and they will pay a good price," Max informed.

"But, but..." stammered Apurv for once in his senses and not the other world.

"No ifs and buts, Apurv. It's simple – you just sneak out stuff and you will have Radhika with you whenever you want...the choice is yours."

"Won't ever do it; never ever..."

Max knew that once Apurv went on a high, nothing could stop him from giving in. So powerful was the effect that it combined pain with ecstasy.

Apurv bunked classes as usual, but that day it was something different. He walked through the quiet corridor, wondering which room to target though his conscience battled within him at every step.

Room 1C-186 in C block was deserted.

'Sincere guys, Arjun and Dheeraj, have gone to class, leaving the key on the edge of the ventilator above the door' thought Apurv, cautiously moving his palm across the edge and bringing the key down.

The small voice inside Apurv spoke, 'This is wrong. You have never done this before. You shouldn't do this. Would you do this, if others were watching?'

Fear gripped Apurv and the key fell to the floor. A bigger voice drove him further, 'You want to meet Radhika and this is the only route to her.'

Although fear of being caught plagued him, the bigger voice with its alluring incentive took the upper hand. Trembling, he bent down and picked up the key.

'Let me make sure nobody's here,' he thought and looked in both directions.

'No sign of humans. Good.'

Click! The lock turned open. There was no turning back now that he was inside. He bolted the door from inside. Involuntary planned actions followed.

'Shit! Arjun's wardrobe's handle is chained.' He moved towards Dheeraj's, and saw it had a tiny green lock on the handle. 'Presumably, he never imagined this to come. Such a small lock,' Apurv smiled.

The file once nicked off from BMS lab was more than enough. The only hurdle left for Apurv now was the cupboard lock. 'It's a breeze...' Click!

Within a few nanoseconds, Apurv's bag was at least heavier by 3 kg.

"Nice work, Apurv. Dell Inspirons sell at 20k. Give us more and we will make you king!" Max said, congratulating Apurv on his big catch, without getting caught.

Shantanu and his group mates remained too busy handling projects and belling the CAT to give a damn on what Apurv was up to those days.

Nimisha watched silently, maintaining the distance but bleeding inside while curbing her feelings and longing for Apurv. There was nobody to express her feelings to.

Numerous wrongdoers were thrown out of the hostel for indisciplinary activities like indulging in booze, boobs, blue films, smoke and sniffers followed by a non-exhaustive list.

But, Apurv always eluded and befooled the people by nicking off in time. A person is innocent until proven guilty. If by mistake he is caught the first time, it gets passed as only a mere mistake, but a mistake undiscovered is never done.

“You were right. He is really worth a lot,” Dev ultimately acquiesced with Saz.

“Who knows what the future holds!!” Saz replied in an experienced tone “Apurv is under me. I control him, possess him nearly.”

The penultimate sessional exams drew near but Apurv remained too dizzy to be bothered at all. The student syndrome triumphed around the campus. The night outs, the xerox, the mini and micro xerox, all ruled the campus.

Apurv looked at the white ceiling and glanced at his artificial intelligence question paper. Questions zoomed in the air to escape out of the paper as Apurv hummed his own tune. ‘Oh, fuck, I don’t know anything. I’m screwed,’ he thought. This was his condition in all the papers that he appeared.

Most of his time he spent with the Swats. They exploited him to the maximum. His need was highest and desperation made him the highest earner in the gang. As a result, he was respected and well cared for.

“We will take you to your Radhika,” Saz said, throwing the half finished bun into the dustbin “Rom, fire up the barbecue. Tonight we will have fun.”

“Of course, we will,” jeered the others, throwing a glance at Apurv. There was no better place than Atmaram to puff and pour.

Pitch-dark night above, no entry time for final years, no moonlight to guide them, Apurv sat passively behind Saz on the black Karizma bike, riding at 110km/hr.

“Your Radhika is inside the room. Do whatever you want with her,” Saz pointed to a door and pushed Apurv towards it.

Impressed to have a guy like Apurv in his gang, Saz had directed the brothel manager to provide the best services to Apurv.

Throwing a dirty smile to himself, Saz strode towards his own prize. ‘Having connections with the manager make things so simple. Why doesn’t the mother-fucker get this place renovated?’ he said, sniffing the gloom around.

“Come baby, come, come towards your Radhika. Feel the ups and down I have to offer you,” Lezeena said as she stripped. “Fuck me, baby, fuck me hard. Let the juices flow; let the drops be worth it.”

She pulled Apurv towards her. Her breasts protruded, nipples stuck out of the red T-shirt she wore. Black jeans torn at all important places stuck to her thigh and butt. She started pulling her top up, revealing a milky white, pierced navel surrounded by soft attractive skin of a sixteen-years old. Apurv approached her. She took his arm and placed it on her butt. A hot, sexy, stripping, inviting, naked body had the ability to transform a saint into a nomad. Apurv got tempted as his conscience got overshadowed by sexual lust. With his mind and senses numb and seeing her gradually remove her top and expose the tip of a round, waiting-to-be-pressed breast, his left hand slid inside the remnant of the unopened top, which he pulled off completely.

His other hand desperately searched a way inside her jeans. She bent and lowered her jeans. A nude body stood in front of him, baring her legs and her crotch covered by a white, thin clothing, hiding the heaven beneath it.

Irresistibly, he held her panty on both sides and pulled it down. Her assets now belonged to Apurv. Bending down in front of her, he touched her thighs and moved gently upwards. She removed Apurv's clothes. Seeing her naked, he plunged. They kissed on the lips. He licked on her left breast, fingering her down.

Juices of pleasure flowed inside her. She was experienced and knew what and where men liked it most. Uncontrollable passion erupted inside him. He wanted it; he wanted it fast. Lezeena wriggled and Apurv licked. She moaned and Apurv kissed her on her ears. He licked it, his thing hanging just above hers. He thrust it towards hers. She didn't show any resistance. He squeezed her breast and pressed her nipples hard. She didn't scream. He was taken aback. "It's all mechanical. It's not the same. This sensuality is not love. No feeling at all. It's just physical."

*Wax can't do anything else but to burn off...  
Tears can't stay anywhere, except to slide off...  
My heart doesn't thrive for getting your love fulfilled...  
By being in love, the heart can't be invulnerable,  
It has to break off...*

## Introspect the Retrospect

*'I can see the darkness all around. Nothing comforts me. Where are the remaining syringes?' There were none.*

*'I know, the stick won't be of much help but I need something.'*  
*He looked out and took not much time to find it. He searched for the stick's better half, found the lighter and felt relieved. 'Aah! It was such a relief, finally.'*

*Out of nowhere, a mirror appeared before him. 'It doesn't reflect me. It's darker than the night itself. I have doomed my existence. There was some strange man, amidst the smoke, burdened by his deeds. The harder he tries to hide behind the smoke, the more he becomes evident.'*

*"Radhika, please let me try it once."*

*"No, Apurv, everything starts with 'just once' only."*

*"Won't I look cool?" he lighted the cigarette.*

*Apurv recalled, 'The look on Radhika's face, I can never forget. I have done something which can't be revised as it will always remain a mark on Radhika's hand. Her beautiful eyes were filled with tears, not because of pain, but me.'*

*"If you want to smoke, you can smoke. Fine, smoke, but I will put them off this way only. You have a choice."*

*Radhika, struck the lighted end on her skin, burning a red spot right away.*

*'Was it a dream or was I hearing voices?' Apurv realised, 'No, it was coming from within. I always had it inside me. The*



smoke is getting cleared, but, I still don't know the person.' Apurv drew nearer. The person had a hideous face. He couldn't face his own reflection. Suddenly he looked in Apurv's eyes, red ones filled with anger and injustice.

"Why have you ruined me?"

"I don't know you. What have I possibly done to you?"

"That's what you have done. You have destroyed the Apurv that Radhika loved."

It drew up to him "I don't know my reflection. My reflection doesn't know me. It was my Radhs, who does not know me."

He shrieked and shouted, but all he could see was syringes, bottles, swabs of several burnt ends, thousands of them.

'Yes, I have burnt down my Radhika. She was always with me. She was always within me. I only never let her out. She never left me. I only moved away from her by every butt I burned, by every bottle I gulped, by every shot I pierced into my veins. I didn't need these things to feel her. She was not around but her love always was. Every time she tried to come near me, I pushed her away,' Apurv fell to the ground clutching his head. Hours flew by.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Party! Satyam! This time you can't run away...nine pointer twice!"

"Congrats to you too! Keep it up as 8.7 is really awesome!"

Apurv heard jovial voices in the corridor.

'Holy shit! Results?' Apurv exclaimed to himself. 'How excited Radhika became every time the results were declared!'

Gathering the courage and pulling together all his strength, he gazed at the notice-board.

Among the different reactions from different people, he searched for his roll number and ultimately found it.

Apurv Malhotra  
Roll :- 50589331

Subjects	Grades
Artificial intelligence	-
Cryptography & network security	-
Internet technology	-
Image processing	F
Management information system	C
IT lab	F

‘Fuck! Fuck! Crap, man! I have screwed everything.’ There was no point in cursing. Apurv was debarred in three subjects and had flunked in the rest except for one, which didn’t add to much.

“Mr Apurv?”

Three cops in uniform stood among the crowd of to-be-engineers. In the tension of the results, Apurv had failed to notice the siren of the blue-white PCR van entering the School of Technology gate and the policemen trotting towards him.

“Yes, I am,” said a surprised Apurv.

“Get ready for hell, you fucking bastard,” said one of them and the merciless thrashings started.

“Stealing laptops?” the officer commanded the constables.

Heavy blows after blows landed on him. His forehead started bleeding and with the broken arm, Apurv fell down unconscious on the dark, solid floor of the ‘correctional institution’ used to detain persons.

Hours ticked away, leaving behind a completely destroyed twenty-one year old — a lost love, a crashed career, a police case and an unending pain, that was all that remained with Apurv.

Lezeena's effect yet to wear out, betrayal of a promise and devastating pain smeared through him. He could smell the dark stones beneath him. It smelled of a rotten dead body. Iron bars constricted the flow of the soul, gradually sucking happiness and life out of him.

'This is not what she wanted. This is not what I wanted. The fucking mistake I was about to commit – the promise of lifelong love with Radhs was about to be broken. Everybody is cheating me, pushing me to a dead end.'

He tried to look up at the sky, but all he could see was thick stone slabs. He started quivering all over, eyes swollen and tears of pain pouring out, making them red.

Suddenly he noticed he was not alone. He looked up and noticed Prateek and Bunty from college and who had been involved in robbing rooms of the hostel through mutual collaboration. He remembered how gravely Radhika had loathed them. 'I have become like them, a thief. Those bastards and liars, Shams thinking of Saz and his gang taking me to Radhs. It seems, just yesterday, Radhs left me, to face this world alone, to live a life of misery. I have ruined myself, screwed up all my exams. Whatever Radhika wanted of me, I didn't even try to acquire it for her. I gave her pain. Time is lost, everything is lost and I cannot regain it back. Life is an inferno, I have to cross it unscathed. I need to change. Situations can't shatter me. It's time I took charge. Nothing has the power to control me. I will become what Radhika wanted. I will fulfil her dreams, her expectations. I will start a new life.'

No strong evidence was found against Apurv and eventually, he was released. Saz, owing to his deep connections with local politicians, got away scot-free although Max and a few other gang members had tough luck because without any big shot's backing, they were convicted.

In life, one always finds oneself at crossroads – one fork for the right one and the other, for the wrong. Most people choose the latter because it's obviously the easy one.

Apurv had invariably been a part of the crowd, but this time he vowed to differ. Walking on the right one has always been difficult. Love is the greatest courage and Apurv had it. Battling life in a rehab required the courage to get rid of the addiction habit. Addiction for this addict was just a means of reaching exaltation.

“I never realised that is my search for Radhs, I forgot she was always with me. She never left me. She was everywhere around me. I never realised she was not lost; she was in my every smile and in every smile that others had because of me.” This dawned on him rather late, but better late than never. He could feel her presence without any psychological or physical dependence on anything. Realisation pulled the trigger to ignite the fire and conviction required to bring about changes within him.

Within three weeks, he was released from the rehab as he got cured of every possible craving. With rehabilitation over, it was time for rectification.

Apurv walked through the dungeons and hallways of Kings Palace V, fearing the dark. Already in limelight, Apurv's behaviour had earned enough disrepute among all the hostellers. Their sympathies had given way to despise, when they threw him disgusting looks.

‘I will have to do it. I will have to fight my fear,’ Apurv told himself.

The next moment, he was standing in front of those eight guys, five of whose mobiles had been stolen while the rest had lost their laptops.

“Guys, listen, I will repay you for what I have done. I will give back all your mobiles and laptops. I accept my crime. Please give me a few days,” begged Apurv.

“He is a liar, friends. Do not fall in his trap. Once college life gets over, he will run away. This bastard will have to pay now, fucking now and we will make him do that. In his own way,” shouted Ankit to the rest of his companions.

Everybody took out their belts and fighters, but these were unnecessary as most of them were wearing Woodland boots.

Once his friends had now turned into foes and were more than ready to take him on. “There is no place for a thief... bloody thief. When the girl was alive, she piled you with studies. Now the bitch has died and made you an insane criminal,” Rohit shouted.

Apurv roared with anger and hit out at Rohit. He was thrown off against the tiled wall. Already furious, victims and their friends pounced on Apurv. He defended himself till the last drop of his strength, but against the ratio of 40:1, he was overpowered and beaten down.

“You fucking son of a bitch, we will throw you out of here. A signed letter to the warden is enough to walk the talk.”

Apurv was thrown out, bruised and broken everywhere. With an aching back, blackened eyes and barely having the power to walk, he dragged himself along the side of the road, searching for a paying guest accommodation.

“Here’s your key. No puffs and bottles allowed. The main gate closes at 10 p.m. at night, blah blah...”

Apurv, though physically defeated, gathered all his mental courage to take the difficult but the correct path.

“When I went against my conscience, I was not in absence of allies. But now, when I want to make up for my immoral deeds, I am walking alone on this lonely road. Apurv smiled to himself. Next day, he went to the dean’s office.

“Sir, I know, I don’t have any valid reason for being debarred from studying, but considering my past record, please allow me to appear for a re-examination.”

The dean replied, “Apurv, you can appear for the back papers next summer.”

“For going abroad, I have to apply eight months earlier. I have got my whole profile ready with the grades. I won't be able to get into any good school with four back papers. Sir, please allow me.”

Apurv stood gazing at the dean with water-filled yet hopeful eyes.

Apurv Malhotra.

SGPA : 9.76

But, his papers were awarded one grade less in each paper in the final marksheet owing to the fact that they were considered back papers.

The dean preferred to help him make his life, keeping aside his misdeed. He did not want to send him to doom forever.

Apurv applied to a few online jobs related to programming but could collect only 40 grands, which was not at all sufficient. It suddenly struck him that Radhika and he together had invested money in shares of Vatyam, which he had bought at a very low price due to the fall in its value. It was a perfect time to encash the profit from the investment. He bought and replaced the gadgets he had stolen from his friends. Some people appreciated his efforts while the rest found it just an act of camouflage. But, Apurv was not bothered as to what others thought of him. All he wanted was to clear his own conscience.

Gradually he joined the elite group of students. Nimisha secretly appreciated the change but regretted not being of any help.

“Romeo didn’t have any children, but my analogy says that he must have secretly slept with someone, because from where else could you get your genes?”

“And from where have you got the genes of Sudama?”

Shantanu approached Apurv and embraced him, saying, “I missed you buddy.”

“I missed you too.”

“Yeah, now let’s stop behaving like chicks,” said Shantanu.

As a result of Apurv’s actions, his efforts bore fruit earlier than expected.

“Apurv! Apurv! You fucker, get up. Open the door. There are some damn letters for you.”

Apurv opened the door to find Shantanu standing outside.

“Fucker, I am not getting this Stanford seal over this.”

“PARTY! Apurv, congrats! Party!”

A big party was celebrated for a big reason. The meal was flagged off with soup, then main course per head – half *tandoori chicken*, three *naans*, one mutton *biryani*, mushroom *pasanda* with few pieces of *Hyderabadi paneer* followed by ice cream, *masala Pepsi*. It was quite evident from the sumptuous banquet that they had starved themselves after breakfast and lunch to make space for this exclusive dinner. They were aware of Apurv only when placing the order and making the bill payment. The gastronomic chauvinists got engrossed in their gastronomic adventure. Apurv sneaked out to get some air and be alone.

Looking at the sky, he thought, ‘We have done it Radhika. I am in that position where you always wanted me to be. I will face each and every difficulty for you. I will never let you down. I will live for you. I will accomplish all you ever wanted to do in your life. I will reach the goal we set for ourselves. No, there’s no space for diversion as you are the only one for me.’

\* \* \* \* \*

Before leaving for Stanford, one unfinished business was yet to be settled.

“I was drunk that night but not so much that I won't be able to know that you love me. You have got a heart filled with love. Just try giving it to the right person, who can give you the same in return. My whole life isn't even enough for loving Radhika. And all my love is for her only. If I have ever hurt you in any manner, please forgive me. You are the only person whom I still owe an apology,” Apurv said to Nimisha.

“You are crediting my love with sympathy?”

“No, I am just telling you that if you are not the one for me, doesn't mean you are for nobody. Since I am in love with someone else doesn't mean you won't get the love of your life.”

He kissed her on her cheeks, whispering, “You are no less beautiful than Radhika, because beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder. In mine, lies Radhs.”

The ray of hope, though minuscule, which her heart contained was destroyed by Apurv's harsh yet assuring words.

Exams got over. College life came to an end. Adhering to custom, a farewell party was thrown by the juniors. With girls dancing to the DJ playing in the background, everyone enjoyed their sad and last moment of college life. This had been their home since the past four years.

This is how life moves. Seniors of junior school become junior-most in high school; the twelfth graders become the seniormost in high school but are treated as kids in first year of college. Now they were super seniors in college, standing at the crossroads as juniormost in the workforce.

Many many have had regrets at not getting into IIT or Pilani when they first joined this college but when leaving, not a single one among them would have regretted being here for four years. Neither did Apurv as it was here that he *not only fell in love, but learnt to rise in it.*



*I solaced my heart and stopped it even,  
Attached my heart and broke it apart even,  
In spite of grief, loneliness is here.  
At least God's this much grace is there.*

## Mystic Mist

“Hey man, I don’t know how I will manage in Wipros with you away at Stanford?” said Shantanu, scratching his head.

“You are intelligent; you have two brains – one on the left, the other on the right. On the left, nothing is right, on the right, nothing is left, but I know you will manage,” Apurv smiled.

“Won't you send me the pics? I heard chicks in bikinis roam around in the streets...”

“I thought you preferred them without the bikinis!”

“It all depends on availability!”

Apurv marched towards security check.

“Apurv! Apurv! Wait...”

Apurv turned round to see Nimisha rushing towards him. She handed him a bunch of yellow roses.

“Hey...” she puffed, then gasped, and said, “you will remember me...”

Apurv gently touched her cheeks and gave her an assuring nod.

### STANFORD, PALO ALTO

Gleaming streets, cars zooming at 100 kmph across the length of Palm Drive, the main entrance to the Stanford campus, an awe-inspiring 8,180 acres, making it the largest contiguous college campus in America.

All outdoor stadiums were flooded. Apurv mused, ‘This Californian weather enables outdoor teams to enjoy year-round action and the academic calendar, a unique one, is marked by four distinct ten-week academic quarters and students typically attend classes for three of them each year.’

Apurv noticed the outdoor cafes dotting the Stanford campus – Olives, Net Appétit, Nexus, the Thai Cafe, and Bytes, located in front of the David Packard Electrical Engineering Center. However, it was the Treehouse, the casual Mexican restaurant, which was voted as the ‘favourite place to eat’.

“Huh...It will take me more than a week to try all,” Apurv chuckled.

Unlike India, cycling was arguably the most popular mode of transportation on ‘the farm’.

Stanford students came from all 50 states of USA and from approximately 60 different countries. Apurv simply loved Old Union, the centrepiece of student life and home to the late night eatery while the Axe and Palm was popular on campus for its sushi and crepes.

Apurv looked around. ‘Everything is so cool. Even students are permitted to use their work-study grants to secure employment with non-profit organisations, enabling them to work and get paid. So, studying here won’t burn a hole in my pocket.’

Seeing that half of Stanford students were women, he thought, ‘Seriously Indian engineering colleges are hell. Here boys don’t starve to catch a glimpse of girls.’

Though Apurv instantly fell in love with the place, he wasn’t able to get adapted to it even in a week. He decided to take a round of the nearby city.

San Francisco, the thriving city known for its Bohemian and creative communities, bordered by the San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean, was just 35 miles north of the campus.

Its many neighbourhoods, included Russian Hill, North Beach, the Castro, Japantown, the Mission, Little Saigon and Chinatown were home to the largest Asian community on the west coast.

Apurv went around the city, enjoying the city's iconic spots including the TransAmerica pyramid, the tallest skyscraper in the Bay Area. In the foreground was North Beach, the heart of San Francisco's Italian-American community and home to the west coast movement of the Beat generation.

Intending to return to the campus, he headed to board the Caltrain. Caltrain took students, faculty and staff in less than an hour from the main entrance to the campus in Palo Alto to downtown San Francisco or the birthplace of Silicon Valley.

'Wow! What a city! I could spend my whole life here! Such an amazing experience,' Apurv thought but the next moment his face lost colour. He remembered Radhika and how they thought that studying abroad would be so much fun together. 'Radhika would have loved this! No entry time, no dress code. She could have worn anything she wanted, partying all the year round in this hip-hop culture! Night outs! But these things don't mean much to me without her. Now I am here alone. Two years is a long time. One whole life longer.'

Earlier I took the wrong fork for love, and now I took the right one for love. And here I am. I love you Radhika; miss you. He heard a whistle and turned to see his train about to leave and that was the train to take him back. He started running in that direction. He sprinted fast and faster to catch it. He was determined that nothing could stop him from reaching this goal of his. 'I won't miss it. Now I won't miss any target in my life.' His resolve prodded him, 'I will catch it, no matter what.' He ran breathlessly at the second whistle! He ran as if some unknown power had promised to deliver Radhika to him, only if he caught the train.

The doors came out of their sheath, threatening to smash Apurv.

His veins throbbed, bursting at the temple. The whistling train was a battle for Apurv. With a foot between the closing doors, 'Do or die', he thought and plunged for it. The magnetic doors shut, but he managed.

He lay on the floorboard, gasping for breath. The passengers who had noticed his feat, clapped at the endeavour. He could feel the train leaving out of the station.

Triumphed, his insides screamed, demanding their winning trophy. He got up to take a peek at the disappearing station.

He caught a glimpse. He called out, "Radhika! RADHIKA!"  
Radhika disappeared from the station.

## **By Chance or By Choice**

“Is that you Radhs??” Erica yelled in astonishment, turning her back towards the TV and focusing on Radhika.

Erica was Radhika’s blonde room-mate. They had met during the MBA admission interview and since then, they had been sharing a room.

“No, that’s not me,” Radhika approached the television to stare at the screen.

“But, the girl in that picture looks exactly like you,” Erica gazed at the TV to make out the picture properly, “except for the scar on your face.” Her voice choked and she realised that she had said something she wasn’t supposed to.

“No, I am not the same girl. I am nothing in comparison to her,” Radhika turned away from Erica. Erica saw something in her which was unfathomable. “She was incredible; she was fun-loving, caring, friendly, cheerful, ambitious and connected to life.” Radhika paused and ran her fingers over the image displayed on the LCD. “She was beautiful. I miss her,” and tears rolled down her cheeks.

With a sigh, words came out of her mouth, “She was the one Apurv fell in love with.”

Erica came near and held her hand. “Radhs, I know that I am not a good friend of yours and we barely know each other, but, still, you can share whatever happened. Maybe I can help you.”

“No one can help me. Everything is over. I am destined to live a solitary life,” Radhika hid her tearful face.

“Maybe I can’t be of any help, or probably you don’t need anybody. But I can guarantee you one thing – if you share your feelings with me, they will become less painful to bear,” Erica tried to convince her.

Apurv’s voice echoed throughout the room. “Radhika, I know you are there, watching me. Please come back to me. Contact me at 002-416-9996-6911.”

Radhika silently switched off the television. She wasn’t able to control herself. The sight of Apurv after so many years had aroused all the feelings she had buried deep in her heart. Her face portrayed the unfathomable grief and concealed fears. The strength with which she had managed to keep herself away from Apurv was no longer there.

Apparently, Erica was able to read her face and it took a few more sentences to break down the barriers erected by Radhika.

“It was so wonderful,” Radhika began, recalling the best days of her life with Apurv. “For a few unlucky people, when everything goes perfect, it becomes time for the devil to attack...”

She connected to *the* past.

“I met Apurv during my engineering days in India. We became friends.”

Radhika narrated her entire past without taking even a pause. Her face dazzled while she told Erica about Apurv – how they met, what he was like and how she was like when she was with Apurv, how they got committed, how they split up, how their love brought them close again, how they rediscovered their love...

“But that accident...” her voice cracked, her expression grew intense, her face turned gloomy and terrified.

“What accident?” a grave expression came on Erica’s face.

“That accident that changed everything. I still remember every bit of it. That fateful day, Apurv came to drop me at the airport. I was going to Malaysia for my sister’s marriage. After the baggage scanning, I proceeded towards the check-in lounge. His last words of concern still echo in my ears. I bid him goodbye and carried on. I never imagined in my wildest dreams that it would be my last goodbye to him. I felt that Apurv wanted to say something to me. I turned towards him, but...” Radhika sobbed “...the automatic doors closed. He was stopped at the barricade and I followed the crowd.

“But now I regret not being able to hear him, because that would have been the last time I would have heard him.”

Erica patted her, “What happened next??”

“I waited for the announcement and then boarded the aircraft. It was cold and rainy outside. I took my seat, beside the window. The usual safety instructions followed; I put on my seatbelt and waited for the takeoff. The massive engines roared to life and the plane gathered speed on the runway. Before I knew, we were soaring high and I could see the houses below getting smaller as the city landscape gradually got out of sight and the horizon seemed limitless.

“I bid Apurv goodbye in my heart and I am sure he must have done the same. We went higher into nothingness. The clouds flew past me. I wanted to touch them. I wanted to fly with them. I was satisfied to have Apurv in my life. I learnt to cherish the little joys which we encountered on the journey of life. These thoughts huddled in my mind.”

She crossed her arms, closed her eyes, took a deep breath and continued, “At that time, I didn’t have a single idea that each step forward was taking me so far from Apurv that it would be an endless journey backward.

“‘Would you like to have some soft drink?’ the airhostess said. My chain of thoughts got interrupted. Refusing the drink,

I shook my head. I checked my watch. There was plenty of time. I switched on my laptop and gazed at Apurv's photographs, one following the other in a slide show. The day had been tiring, I dozed off...

"After a few hours of flight, I don't know how many... suddenly I felt a slight jerk. I woke up. The pictures on the screen shook a bit. Then it came to my notice that the plane was shuddering. Ignoring it, I closed my eyes again, but in a few minutes it became obvious that the tremors were for real. Soon after, the co-pilot came and announced, 'We are going through turbulent weather. Boarders are requested to remain seated and fasten their seatbelts.'

"But the plane had started to shake violently and the passengers started to panic a bit. The same booming announcement came up again, 'Passengers are requested to fasten their seatbelts and not panic. We require your cooperation. Please remain seated.'

"The word 'relax' sounds so pleasing when you are working on a project, but when you are on a trembling plane, it is the last thing you would like to do. The announcement subdued the passengers' tension and their faces relaxed a bit but it was apparent that danger loomed over them. The relief was shortlived. I thought of Apurv and how he must be on his way to the hostel. I prayed to God to make everything alright but my prayers went unheard, I guess. The turbulence increased in spite of what seemed fine weather outside. An announcement informed us that the altitude was 40,000 feet above the sea level and we were flying over the Bay of Bengal. But something was wrong and I could feel gravity pulling us downward. This fact contradicted the announcement. Rest of the co-passengers seemed oblivious to it. Then I saw it!

"The jet turbines were stuck. It was splintering and smoke erupted from them. The plane tilted towards the right. Everyone saw it then. Panic spread more rapidly than fire. The pilot came



in, 'Do not panic. The fire will be controlled. We are heading towards Yangon in Myanmar for temporary stoppage and maintenance.'

"His plea went in vain. It was a point of no return and people knew it. Some prayed, 'God please help us' and some questioned him, 'What will happen to my family?'

"A mother told her kid, 'Son, I will get you a Play Station 3 when we get down in Malaysia. Come dear, sit down. Don't roam around.'

"I looked outside. The fire had spread to the left wing containing the fuel tank. Despair and tension took over. I knew what was coming.

"My whole life flashed in front of me. I saw myself playing with my sisters, my first school, how happy I was after my Board result, my father dropping me to college, my becoming 'Miss Fresher', my life with Apurv, his love for me...The past was being recaptured with all the acquaintances flying in and out of my mind...Persons close to my heart stood surrounding Apurv who stood in the centre, with arms folded, smiling at me. The image dissolved in a spiral journey to nowhere. I experienced it all, like a fast-forward motion picture. Those last few seconds...

"A booming noise and the craft ripped into two. People were thrown off and many fell from the plane. My head hit something very hard and the seatbelt pulled me towards the seat. I was somersaulting in the air. Everything was rushing. There was hollowness everywhere. I was swirling; I was flying. That was the last thing I knew. Everything went blank."

*When your eyes fill with tears,  
I gather the courage to spurn them...  
I am going far away from you.*

## Purely Numb

BEEP!

BEEP!

BEEP!

“A blurred image of my cousin Anjali appeared. I looked around, trying to focus on my surroundings but what I could see was white everywhere – beds, blankets and even the walls. I saw bottles of drips and blood hung around. Within no time, I deduced I was in hospital. I tried to recall what had happened but the only thing I could recall was, WATER. Water gushing in lungs, water trying to tear my body apart. It was hard to grasp – water outside was defeating me or water inside. Then I felt something crush me, pulling me out. My sister hugged me, ‘Thank God, you are fine!’

“She had her best intentions for me but was unaware that after so many hours of coma, drenched of all energy, even a hug seemed to be a pain.

“She was sobbing, ‘Nothing has happened to you; we were so worried.’

“How am I here?” I inquired.

‘In spite of being unconscious for the last ten days, we knew you were going to make it. You have always been a fighter.’

“How am I here?” I repeated, still trying to grasp what was happening.

“My sister answered excitedly, ‘It was a miracle. A ship found the wreck of your plane floating in the waters of the Bay of Bengal. You were the lone survivor. It was a divine

coincidence that your seat was at the back of the craft and you were still tied to the seat belt. The crew of the ship found the ripped off tail and searched in the hope of seeing some survivors. Others on board were either charred to death or became victims of gravity. Bodies must have drowned by the time the rescue teams arrived.'

"No one else survived?" Radhika inquired.

'The person sitting beside you was found breathing. Medicos tried their best to save him, but despite their efforts, he passed away on the way to the hospital.'

"I gasped. Everybody was gone. The small kid, who hadn't even seen the world, wouldn't see it now. All those faces huddled up – those smiling, elated faces, that girl who was flying for the first time was so happy. People buying tickets wouldn't have thought that they were purchasing death."

'The crew dropped you to the hospital and we were informed by the police', said Anjali, wiping away her tears. 'This news was all over that nobody survived the catastrophe. We were devastated, but fortune was by your side. I called your home and informed them...'

"My sister continued while I was drowned in my own thoughts. Her voice became feeble.

"I am alive. I am really alive. Was that a dream? Nothing is gone. Life is never worth living that much as it is when death engulfs you. Survival in this world is really tough. People have double faces – communal wars, atrocities against women, exploitation of poor, pressure of competition at each stage of life, survival of the fittest, fighting with life every day, but still this life is worth living. I want to live. I want to laugh. I want to shed my tears. Maybe I am the only person who knows the importance of life more than any other person. The closer the death creeps in, the more you long for life and I have

experienced that longing. I was glad to be alive; I was thrilled to joy.

“The horrifying thought suddenly struck me that if the media had not reported any survivors, Apurv may not know about me. He must be shocked with grief. What mental trauma he must be undergoing all these days? How would he be now? I got up hurriedly, thinking about Apurv. I tried to get up and regain my senses but bandages prevented me. With a paramedic’s help, I got down and started walking with small but firm steps. I tried to recollect everything – my life, college – but, except flashes of light, nothing passed my eyes. I walked and walked towards my Apurv to tell him that I was with him and would be always with him.

“I marched forward without turning back. My steps slowed down as I had to turn back to prove that it was just a myth.

“I stopped short. My legs could hold me no more. I had seen something in the mirror. In the white atmosphere everything became dark. I became numb. I was alone – laughing, crying, joyous faces laughing at me, all crying for me. Among all these, the dreaded one evolved out of the mist. Maybe my sins were far more to be granted a simple death. Now I was destined to die every day. I shrieked and shrieked as though I was going to burst my veins.

“My consciousness was shortlived this time. My face was burnt. My eyebrows were gone. Big stitches ran across my cheeks to the forehead. Skin peeled off from my face and neck. My face was scarred and blackened. I could not control myself. I caught my face and started howling.”

“My sister held me tightly, ‘Don’t worry Radhika, your skin will grow back in a year. You will be fine. These are nothing compared to your life. The burns are fresh and the doctors are not in favour of surgery.’

“I could not utter a word. I just held her and went on crying. I will have to die for Apurv to live. I can’t face Apurv like this. I just can’t. He would never know I have survived. Let him remember me as he knew me. That moment I decided I would never confront Apurv again. Let him cherish our memories and lead his life. He deserves someone much better than me. I don’t want to be a nightmare for him all through his life.

“I decided not to return to college and hence stayed with my sister in Malaysia. I somehow passed my days. I tried to call Apurv many a times. Often I garnered the courage but failed miserably. Every time I picked up the receiver, horrifying thoughts crept in my mind. Now Radhika will never go back to her Apurv. My sister said, ‘By not welcoming the life you have, you commit the worst sin ever. A hundred and two passengers were on that plane and among them you got the chance to live again. When they look down at you from heaven, they would think how lucky you are that you have got a chance to be back again. How many mothers would have been there, whose children must be wailing as nobody would be there to take care of them? Several couples would have been there who must have got separated? Some might be the only earning member of their family in whose absence their family must be shattered not only emotionally, but also financially. Those people would be wishing, trying so hard to be in your place. Instead of patronising it, you are wasting it. Start living Radhika. Please, for us, for yourself. Value your life for the sake of all of them who don’t have it now.’

“My sister was true. Her anger was justified. I started living. ‘Living’ is a subjective word. If doing your day-to-day work and to start studying is living, then I was living again. I worked hard, harder and harder. Being involved meant having less time to remember Apurv. It really helped to some extent. Whenever

Apurv's smile arose in my mind, I sensed his touch, I heard his voice. I drove myself to be occupied.

“Our Chancellor was very considerate and allowed me to appear for the supplementary exams during the vacations. Apurv visited my home a few times but I had made my sister to hide every information about my survival. During my stay, I had enough spare time. I prepared for completing masters in business. I applied to many schools. One thing led to another and I came here. I thought I would go to such a place where nothing could remind me of Apurv. I tried to run from his shadow but he has appeared before me.”

*Have thrived for someone for the first time,  
Have loved anyone for the last time.*

## **An Illusionary Feat**

Erica cried out, “Why did you do that?”

“Do you think it was easy for me? Did I get any pleasure in keeping myself away from the only person I love? Whatever I did was for protecting him, to help him lead a normal, happy life. I did what was the need of time. I did not have any control on the accident, but the best I could do was to save Apurv from its aftermath.”

“But Radhs, nobody is the beneficiary here. You separated from your family, your friends. Look at yourself – you are anything but a happy person and coming to Apurv, can’t you see he is writhing in pain? If, what you did was fundamentally correct, then why aren’t either of you happy?” asked a disapproving Erica.

“You can’t expect a person, who has lost the capability to believe in herself to make others believe in themselves; you can’t expect a person to be with someone and raise a life who herself is trying to bind together her life. How could I imagine that Apurv wouldn’t have missed the old Radhika when I can’t stop myself every time I confront a mirror? Two years have passed and I have not been able to get on with my life. So how could I have asked Apurv to love me the same way he used to? He is a great guy and has committed no sin, so why should I punish him by imposing myself on him? He deserves a great career, a beautiful girl who will take care of him and a great life ahead. And certainly I am not the one now. It’s not only about my burnt face; it’s about my confidence which has lost its existence. If I

walk back in his life, I know he will try his best to make me feel the same, but I don't have any hope of happiness.

"Life is never easy. It's so easy to think that I could have gone back to our college and everything would have become fine as time progressed. Apurv would have always smiled in front of me but within he would have to endure excruciating pain of loving what he has and not miss what he had."

Radhika heaved a sigh, "In this long course of time, which was even longer than a lifetime, whenever Apurv's thought brushed my mind, it came along with the dreaded fear that what if he didn't accept me? If I had returned, I would have become a responsibility and then a burden. And in that state, Apurv wouldn't have been able to concentrate either on his career or his life. And he would have even forgotten the meaning of happiness and the ability to love.

"I want him to remember me the way I was; keep my love for him as a remembrance and love me the way he used to, 'coz now I won't be able to love him with that passion. I am no longer worthy of his love."

Taking a deep breath, Radhika smiled to Erica and continued, "Many a times it happens that people don't know how miserable they are until they look from someone else's eyes. Like poor people don't know they are poor until they meet someone who is rich. I was selfish somewhere as I didn't want Apurv's eyes to mirror my misfortune.

"I wouldn't have been able to endure the pain or desperation in Apurv's eyes at finding his Radhika and the disappointment that would have followed."

Radhika glanced at the mirror.

"If your grief becomes the reason for the suffering of your loved ones, you undergo death each and every second. And I lacked that strength."



Radhika was overcome with emotions and for the first time she realised how much she was holding back. Erica tried to console her.

“It doesn’t happen every day that you find the love of your life. Realise the power of love. Whatever strength or courage you need, Apurv love’s can provide it to you. He really loves you.”

Radhika wiped away her tears and said, “I have done it once before. I can do it again. I need to pack.”

Seeing Radhika’s plight, Erica said gently, “True love never has a sad ending, as true love can never end.”

*Love means different things to different people – some can die for it and for some it's the only reason to live...*

*To love somebody is nothing in comparison to make the same person fall in love with you. I made you fall in love with me again and again.*

## The Final Goodbye

Radhika's cab zoomed into the airport. Tears rolled down her face. The taxi-driver noticed it and asked, "Can I help you, ma'am?"

"Just remember, being loved by someone you love is the greatest gift of God. Value it," said Radhika and rushed inside the airport.

Remorse and regret filled her but she seemed oblivious to it. She kept on running towards the successive gates, hurrying to board the plane which she knew hadn't landed yet. But Apurv's voice kept on hovering inside her mind as if holding her back *The day seems short, really short. It is just not adequate to watch your smiles or feel your closeness.*

She looked at the glowing 'TERMINAL A' signboard, promising never to see it again, never to see the place she was leaving behind, never to visit the place where she would.

"Can you tell me the flight to Boston?" Radhika asked as impatience became apparent to the help-desk.

"Go down the lane and take the left, ma'am," came the response.

Radhika was not sure whether she was walking or flying but whatever it was, she was moving nearer to her goal – her goal of getting away from Apurv. She reached the lounge. 'The harder I am trying to wipe his thoughts from my mind, why is it they keep coming back again and again?'

*'How gorgeous you will look in the bridal attire! It creates euphoria whenever I think of you as my bride.*

*'I never had a list. For me it was just you, then, before and after. For me it goes on like this – Radhika, Radhika, Radhika...'*

Radhika started screaming, "Oh!! Stop it! Please stop it. I can't take it any more."

People turned to stare at her. She realised she was not alone. She returned to her thoughts, 'I won't be able to hear 'Radhika' from him again. Let me never have to hear it again 'Radhika, Radhika'...' "

'RADHIKA!'

'RADHIKA!'

"God please, I beg you to stop this. I can't bear it any more," Radhika pleaded, closing her eyes.

"Radhika," again the same voice bellowed.

"It's time God heard me."

She opened her eyes. Apurv stood in front of her and she was thrilled, then sorrowful and finally scared.

After an exchange of a few unsaid words, Radhika said,

"Apurv..."

"Radhika, stay, stay with me."

"You don't understand, I can't."

"You never understood my love. You always believed in sacrifices and I in unconditional love. I never answered whenever you asked about our separation coz I never intended to do so..."

"You may find several reasons for not being with me, but you can't ignore the fact that I have been living for you. Why Radhika, why does our love for each other separate us? You wanted me to study and have a great career ahead. I also wanted to make a career and live life with you. But even at that time, the only solution that appeared was to move apart. Now too the

situation is same – you love me, that’s why you stay away from me. I love you – that’s why I suffer in your absence. But if that’s the solution, why isn’t any of us happy? Please try and understand love means staying together and making each other’s life beautiful. Let me be a part of your life. No differences are great enough to shatter us when we are together. Let me stay with you and I will give you the strength to cope with everything. And if not for that reason, let me stay with you for my sake. I feel incomplete without you.”

Apurv took a deep breath and started again in a raised voice, “All present here...let me introduce you all to my sweetheart, the dearest, cutest, beautiful, sweetest, hottest, sexiest, most awesome, most caring, most delightful, most elegant, most mesmerising girl in the whole universe. Having found her, I consider myself to be luckiest in this world.”

His voice forced some to turn and see what was happening, “My dearest sweetheart here is the best in everything – from the world of academia to the prospect of painting, she’s the epitome of excellence in Madhubani, modern and traditional, eastern and Western arts, though I haven’t seen any except her classic Madhubani. I guess they will be as good as Michelangelo’s stuff. She is the diva in dance, she illustrates all. She sings beautifully and I can listen to her days altogether. Her recorded songs are there with me to inspire and provide solace to me during solitude. My favourite is ‘*Take me away to a secret place...*’ She’s simply great in that.”

He looked at Radhika imploringly and forced a smile to conceal his fright,

“As for her dressing style, it has got that oomph factor in it which makes heads turn really. Which dress is complementary to what, while which one supplements another – she knows it all. Contrary to Darwin that history repeats itself, her dresses simply don’t. Her collection is larger than the days in a year –

nothing conventional. New fashion every day is what she stands for. It seems to her that change is the only constant...

"It doesn't just end here. She's a designer as well. Her wardrobe has been designed by her only and the styles completely blend with her radiant look and persona, and all the to-be-converted-to-outfits designs are just amazing. Fashion designers ought to take a leaf out of her book...."

By this time Apurv's plea had attracted many. Apurv went close to Radhika and whispered, "Whatever reason you gave to Erica for not being with me isn't enough. You see, Radhs, this time I am going to win this debate coz it's not just a debate for me; it's my life..."

Radhika looked around and saw Erica in the midst of the crowd gathered at Apurv's appeal, smile at her.

Apurv again moved towards the crowd, "As for her handwriting, this is one thing I seriously would like to adopt from her. My sweetheart has got one of the best calligraphy skills that will render you dumbstruck..."

He moved closer to Radhika and took her hands in his, to describe his feelings, "Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder and for me, the list of the prettiest girl goes on like 1 Radhika 2 Radhika 3 Radhika 4 Radhika...1000 Radhika, 1000000 Radhika and so on. When I see her, my eyes keep watching her; my love and my eyes refuse to move from her. I can keep looking and looking at her till the end of time and her gorgeous looks increase with each passing moment...Her smile stupefies me. I remain amazed at the smile and those curvaceous lips, yeah, lips. They are really, really sexy! Oh, I am not just attracted to them. Though they come next to her eyes in sex appeal, I simply adore those lips when they smile down at me."

A smile spread across all those faces in the crowd who shared the same feeling of love. Apurv praised her more enthusiastically, "If I were to talk on aesthetics, I would certainly

start with her coz beauty starts and ends with her. For me, she's the most beautiful girl in the world – Aphrodite and Cleopatra don't come anywhere near her." His eyes implored Radhika to have the same confidence in herself as he did.

Failing to perceive that, tears began to roll down his eyes. He moved his back towards her in order to hide his tears and facing the masses staring at them, said, "You may find a girl pretty, but when you love her, you find her the prettiest. I find this girl stunningly beautiful. Please, for the sake of the one you love, tell her that..."

Apurv stood absolutely drained, "You are really a pretty little girl," an old lady said, emerging from the crowd.

After a few seconds, several synonyms of beauty started pouring in, "I never had someone to love me like this. This means you are more beautiful than anyone else," said one in the crowd.

"Yeah, even I envy you..."

After some individual statements, almost everybody tried their best to convince Radhika of her beauty. It was quite difficult to distinguish what they were saying but one thing was clear – they had their best intentions at heart and their sympathy lay with Apurv.

Receiving such support, Apurv's spirit got a boost and he wanted to show Radhika what she meant to him.

"She's as beautiful from inside as from outside. She is hell'uva caring and helping girl. My love cares for me a lot. We share almost everything we possibly can. There's great bonding between us. I can feel her love for me...and I am so lucky to have it. I can't imagine life without her. She's an integral part of my life – she lives in every heartbeat of mine. Missed her a thousand times every time I breathed in. She's the first thing on my mind and I start my day with her thoughts; she's the last thing I think off before going to sleep and she's the one about

whom I dream morning and night. They say that dreams reveal your secret desires and my dreams comprise of her, her and only her,” Apurv ended, pointing to Radhika.

She turned away, burrowing her face into a moist handkerchief. Apurv placed his hand over her shoulder and gently turned her towards him and held her waist. “Remember this, I will LOVE YOU forever. I wish you all the happiness and joy in life.”

Radhika said, “Don’t know what kind of bond I share with you.

My brain tells me not to fight but I still do. My brain tells me if I cannot live happily, then break up, but my heart doesn’t let you go.

“My one part says this is not love; the other part asks, ‘then what is it?’ My heart aches at leaving you, still I find reasons to do so. My intelligence says life is better when we are apart, but my heart feels life is not worth living without you. I want to stay with you but end up hurting. I think of you every moment, but can’t find reasons to stay together. The fear of hurting you and losing you is too devastating, but cannot find reasons for not doing so. There’s something deeper than love and this is it...”

Before more words could flow out, Apurv had his reply ready. He drew closer and held her by the waist. He kissed her very softly, pressing his lips over hers; kissed her as never before; kissed her as it would never end. “You died for me, and I lived only for you. If this isn’t love, then it doesn’t matter to me coz this is the purest bond I have ever had with anyone.”

Radhika looked in his eyes and whispered, “I thought I have lost my love, but it was always there where I had left it.”

They kissed again and both knew it was never meant to end.

**The final goodbye! Goodbye to separation!**

*London eye didn't reel you.  
Try love, it's definitely going to!*

## Little Bit of Head Spinning

Darkness all around.

The world was spinning, the other way round. No, the world was constant as a rock. Apurv was the one who was spinning. It's said that if you travel in the reverse direction in comparison to the earth's spin, you can turn back time. That was exactly what was happening. The world jerked and Apurv was thrown away. Time seemed to move backwards. Outside the window, planes zoomed backwards, instead of going towards the runway. The plane which was taking off, descended backwards. There was a relative misunderstanding between the time frame of Apurv and the outer materialistic world. The clocks hung on the wall stopped; they reversed, with the hands ticking in an anti-clockwise direction. They rotated like records in record-players of the olden days. Luggage trolleys automatically positioned themselves automatically and rolled into their stands. Like the scenes being rewind in a movie at high speed, Apurv and Radhika separated. The crowd, which had accumulated, dispersed. Erica disappeared to mingle with the masses. Just as had happened a few moments ago before they had met, the scenes replicated. Apurv ran backwards and suddenly out of the airport. Time was retracing. Radhika glided into the cab in which she had just arrived at the airport.

Scenes shifted back in time. The CalTrain slowed down at the station. Radhika appeared from among the many people on the station. Apurv fell down on the floorboard of the train. He was out, moving away from the train which he had desperately



wanted to catch. Time turning, he moved backwards to the streets of San Francisco. Apurv lingered in the streets of Palo Alto. His footsteps carried him back. He glided past the cafés back to his dorm. Days flew back to the day he landed in Palo Alto. He was back in India, talking to Shantanu, breaking away from the handshake. Nimisha parted, going away from Apurv. Everyone enjoyed Apurv's treat. *Tandoori* chicken glided from their mouths, back to the plates. Stanford's selection letter flew away from Apurv's hand and back to the reception desk of Kings Palace 5. Outstanding semester results slipped off from the notice-boards. Travel on negative axis of the fourth dimension paced on. Apurv took courses at the rehab centre before returning to the hostel. Bruised by hits and kicks of the hostel inmates, Apurv moved out of the hostel, back to the prison, forgetting the disappointing D grades. He lay on the dark corridors with Elezina, releasing her breasts and shoving her away. The world spun while Apurv moved back in time as the beer bottles got refilled and smoke filled his nostrils to reach his lungs. The stolen laptops and mobiles were back with Apurv and reversing the sequence, back inside the locked cupboard of Dheeraj. Apurv parted with the bad company and returned home. He met Radhika's sister and parked the Audi back in the garage. Flashes of dinner table and his parents counselling seemed to cease. Video of Radhika's birthday rewinded along with time and the spinning world. Scenes of college where Shantanu dirtied his room, revealed the burnt butts and empty bottles while Mr and Mrs Malhotra walked out of Apurv's room where he had lain semi-conscious. His first puff of cigarette and he remembered Radhika's period of togetherness. Days of darkness separated, showing the day when he was at the airport. The airline staff repeating the news of the airliner crash, as Apurv sat in a corner in front of the counters in the hope of getting some news of any survivors. Tears rolling down made

things appear hazy. Soon Apurv was back in his room, reading the news flash on his laptop.

*NEWS 3*

*Air India skyliner to Malaysia crashes over the Bay of Bengal just after takeoff. All feared dead.*

*(Click for more)*

*It was never that hard to let my heart find its way to you  
than stop it from doing so.  
It was never that difficult to express my feelings to you than  
to hold them back from reaching you.*

## Presumably Love

White everywhere – beds, blankets and even the walls. Apurv saw Radhika standing beside him. He was in hospital. He sprang up.

“I am sorry, baby. It never came to my mind that my stupid little prank would have this impact on you. I never thought that you will be unconscious for three long days. I am really very sorry,” Radhika hugged Apurv. Her eyes were wet.

Half an hour later, “So lem’me get clear. You saved that ‘crash’ crap in the bulletin of my laptop and disabled the internet connection. News was never getting updated at all...”

“Yup, that’s correct,” Radhika answered sheepishly.

“What’s correct?” Apurv held Radhika’s hand.

“It’s okay, love. Now you are back and we are here together. Forget it as a bad dream or imagine it never happened.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“What’s so complicated then?”

“You won’t understand.”

“I am smarter than you are,” Radhika huffed.

“Baby, let’s not fight over these petty issues. You know what? Now I have become a firm believer that ‘everything happens for good. See, whatever your intentions were or was it just a gag, but I learnt what to expect from you and what path to take if you are not there. All adversity will pass if you are there to hold me back from them.”

“Wow! You went on some realisation trip or what?”

“Sweetheart, I love you a lot, a lot, a lot. I want to live with you happily. I want to make you happy, but if I do fail in some, please forgive me. I have my best intentions at heart for you. Quarrels with you trouble every part of my body, mind and heart. You can’t imagine how painful it for me to hear you shout. Please help me to build a relationship in which we can be happy and proud. Everything can be solved positively and lovingly. Hope you understand. Help me to try to make our relationship stronger.”

### **Two weeks later**

7 a.m.

“Hello.”

“Hello,” Radhika replied in a muffled voice.

“You have fifteen minutes. Your time starts now.”

“You, what? You are all set to go to the Reading Room and it’s a Sunday.”

“Come fast,” Apurv hung up.

Half an hour later.

Radhika came running out of Queen’s Castle. She spotted Apurv holding a single rose in one hand and Barron in the other, and obviously his laptop bag over the shoulders. When Radhika reached him, he presented her the rose and pushing back her hair, kissed her forehead.

“Good morning, sweetheart. Here’s the schedule for today.”

Quantitative Section-complete.

Practice 5-sample papers.

Revision of class notes.

Four coffee breaks.

Lunch- canteen.

Evening- surprise.

“What?”

“What’s what?”

“What has happened to you? Are you somebody else who has got plastic surgery done to look like Apurv.”

“Hey, walk while talking. Let’s start early so that by the evening we will finish our studies and can spend our evening together without having any guilt or burden.”

“You are sounding like a replica of me. It was always me who used to make plans. And it was always you who used to dissuade me by bringing up the idea of romancing and loitering around the campus and thus wasting the holidays. In those days, I could never understand the nagging thought that ‘we have got so much to do’.”

“That’s why I have changed. You remember I promised that I will make you fall in love with me.” But in due course of time I forgot it coz of various distractions. Now I promise again that every passing moment I will make you fall in love with me all over again.”

*Change is the only change that should change or remain constant.* Change was changing, bringing all new meaning to change.

Apurv and Radhika began to study.

Apurv would hold Radhika’s hand underneath the table or ask her to stuff one of the earphones in her ears with the other in his. Metallica Bang! Bang! replaced by romantic numbers of Celine Dion, Enrique, Backstreet.

Such small gestures made the simple study schedule seem less tiresome and slightly more romantic.

Passing faces smiled. Looking directly in each other’s eyes helped them concentrate on their books.

“Radhika, now I have understood your idea of romance. I was wrong before, thinking that our relationship needed us to

go away to a distant place, without our bags and laptop. A few small things can make a whole new world anywhere.”

Radhika smiled and brushed his cheeks with her hands. He pulled her close and kissed her. Fortunately, no one was watching and they returned to their coffee while sitting over the stairs and looking as innocent as possible.

All targets were achieved by the evening.

“You could have told me you planned to go trekking. I would have worn sports shoes instead of heels and jeans in place of the skirt.”

“Come, let me help you. It’s not that high even.”

“Be quick as we have lots to do.”

Upon reaching the top, Apurv took out his bag. It was full of stuff like candles, eatables, thermos, chocolates...

“And I wondered why your bag was huge?” grinned Radhika.

Fifteen minutes and the place was set.

“You said you wanted to slow dance when no one would be watching.”

“I told it a long time back. I thought you would have forgotten.”

“Shhhhhhhhhhh...”

They spent a few minutes in each other’s arm, swinging slowly. Apurv sheltered Radhika in his jacket when settled.

“Radhs! I love you. You are the most wonderful thing that could have ever happened to me. I wanted to tell you this in the hospital but I needed to first show you the change in me before expressing my intentions, so that our relationship wouldn’t sound like an empty vessel to your ears. It’s not about the four years spent here or MBA done together; it’s about my life which I want to spend life with you, cherishing every small things possible. Miss Radhika Sharma, I, Apurv Malhotra promise you:

I will cut vegetables when you cook. And will cook when any movie to your liking is being aired.

I will never pursue you to come to bed if you have some office work. I will try my best to help you. If not of any help, then at least I will make coffee for you.

I will never talk about romance when you want only a friendly hug to convey, 'I am there for you.'

I will watch chick flicks like 'Cinderella Story' with you.

I will always bring a single, long-stemmed roses for you the way you like.

We will go for long walks after holding your hand.

I will never let you go through the most difficult decision in this world. To choose between three or more of your selected clothes, I will buy them all and those with matching earrings.

I will earn only for the sake of your parlour bills and shopping spree.

You can throw away all the combs as my fingers will always be there to disentangle your hair.—”

Radhika stopped by him, putting her hand over his lips. He tried to speak but she stopped him with her lips.

Apurv moved back, “No, I have more...

“Shut up,” she kissed him again.

“I won't let a bad day ever get terrible for you.”

“Will you shut up now...” she kissed him like never before. In his successive attempts, he wasn't able to say more than 'I will...' Then he finally quit and got engrossed in what Radhika was doing.