



can
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strangers
again?

SHRIJEET SHANDILYA

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INDIA • SINGAPORE • MALAYSIA



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To Tam, the calm in my storms.

To Avantika, the mirror that showed me my worth.

And to you, dear reader,

may you lose yourself in these pages

only to find a piece of your soul waiting at the end.

A NEW BEGINNING IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

On a rainy day in Goa, I was sitting in the balcony, admiring the raindrops. The air was thick, heavy with the scent of wet soil, and I felt an odd calmness settle over me. I lit a cigarette, the tip glowing warm orange against the grey backdrop.

The rain had a way of washing everything clean, but today, it only seemed to stir up what I'd tried to bury.

Suddenly I feel a vibration in my pocket. I thought to myself it would be just another college related message. But something in my heart was telling me to check the notification. And there it was, my heart skipped a beat as I read the message. **"Can we be strangers again?"**

I felt a familiar ache, like an old wound reopening. I sighed, slipping the phone back into my pocket, and found myself lost in thoughts of my past—a time filled with extreme emotions of ecstasy and doubt.

Every small detail about my past, be it the lows or the highs reminded me of her, the girl who touched my heart deeply. Her presence was a mix of happiness and heartache, and even though it left a scar, it was beautiful in its own painful way.

"She helped shape the person I am today," I thought, feeling a strange blend of nostalgia and longing.

The rain drummed steadily, like a familiar rhythm underscoring the quiet echoes of my memories. I smiled a little, remembering how we would laugh at the simplest things, how she lit up even the darkest of my days. But just as swiftly, the sadness crept back in—bringing with it the memory

of the day everything changed, the day I learned that some moments leave scars that never fade.

It all began in 2020, a year that seemed to set the stage for countless changes and new chapters in my life. Little did I know then that the year would transform everything, shaping me in ways I could never have imagined.

Now, looking back from 2024, I see how those moments from 2020 laid the foundation for everything that followed.

Let's dive into 2020, back to where it all began.

It was the year I was very excited to start college at Christ University. It felt like a big achievement—it's one of the top commerce colleges in India! I had always imagined walking into this lively campus and meeting new friends.

But then, Covid happened, and everything changed.

Instead of stepping into a bustling campus, I found myself at home, staring at a computer screen. The pandemic meant I was part of the "COVID batch," which also meant starting college from my room. On the first day, I sat at my desk, waiting for my online class to start. It wasn't exactly the college experience I had imagined—no crowded lecture halls, no excited chatter. Just me, and a screen filled with tiny faces.

It felt strange and a bit lonely. I missed the energy of a real classroom and the chance to meet people in person. Now, I had to make friends online and learn through a webcam, which was a new and challenging task.

To break the ice between the new students, the college set up a WhatsApp group for all the new students. I watched as the group filled up with numbers and short introductions. Akinchan, a guy from Ghaziabad, took the initiative to start a conversation. "Hey everyone!" he typed, introducing himself and asking questions about people's interests and backgrounds. His enthusiasm and willingness to engage made a difference, and slowly, the group started to warm up. But not everyone was responsive. Some people read the messages but didn't reply.

Even though it was a slow start, I held onto the hope that once offline classes began, we would all finally have the chance to connect in person. I

looked forward to meeting everyone, building real relationships, even if it took time.

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THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST UNIVERSITY

As I settled into my new routine, the excitement of starting at Christ University was tinged with a touch of nervousness.

When we had our first official introduction, the virtual setting somehow felt special. As I logged in and my screen filled with the faces of fellow students, we were greeted by Dr. (Fr.) Jossy P. George, the university director. His presence, a blend of warmth and authority, stood out amidst the usual Webex monotony.

With a warm smile and a rich, husky voice, He said, 'Good morning, Christites.' His greeting carried a deep sense of pride and belonging. 'I know this year is different, but once a Christite, always a Christite. The spirit of Christ is in our blood.'

Eventually, we were introduced to the Christ anthem. The anthem, with its stirring lyrics and powerful melody, prominently featured the call to "March on, Christites." Even through the virtual setting, hearing those words gave us goosebumps. The anthem was a reminder of our unity and purpose, stirring a deep sense of pride and connection.

As we embraced the university's traditions and values, it became clear that being a Christite was more than just attending a college; it was about carrying a piece of your alma mater with you, no matter where we were or how things changed.



THE FIRST CLASS AND THE UNEXPECTED TASK

The day of our first class had finally arrived, and a buzz of excitement filled the virtual space. As we logged into Webex, a mix of nervousness and anticipation swirled within me. And then, she appeared on our screens—Manjari Ma'am.

“Good morning, students!” she said with her warm voice, it literally felt like a hug for a second.

Well, all I can say is that most of the boys in the class were already flattered.

“Alright, let's get into today's problem” Manjari Ma'am exclaimed, as she maneuvered through her slides.

I groaned inwardly but it was high time I faced my fear of Mathematics.

Mayur, sitting next to me in the virtual room, was also clearly struggling. “I don't get this at all,” he typed in the chat. “Is it just me?”

“Nope, I'm lost too,” Akinchan replied. “But let's hang in there. She's supposed to be good.”

Just as we were getting wrapped up in the numbers, Manjari Ma'am dropped a surprise. “By the way,” she said casually, “I'm married and have a child.”

The revelation hit us like a sudden downpour, dousing our daydreams. The room fell into a stunned silence, and the fantasy we had built around her came crashing down. It was a sobering moment, realizing that the person we admired so much had a full, happy life outside the confines of our virtual classroom.

But Manjari Ma'am didn't let us linger in the shock for long. "To lift the mood," she said with a smile, "We're going to have a fun project. I need you to collect photos of every student, create a collage, and post it on Instagram. The class with the most likes will win a prize."

The change in energy was instant. "That sounds cool!" Saurabh typed enthusiastically. "Lessgooo!"

"Hell Yeah!" I quickly typed, raising my hand on the Webex platform. Soon others joined in too.

"Great! I'll send out the details soon," Manjari Ma'am replied. "Looking forward to seeing your creative collages!"

As we started planning the project, the initial disappointment melted away. The photo collage task became our new focus, and the excitement of collaborating on something fun brought us closer together. It was a chance to turn our day around and make something enjoyable out of it.

The project was more than just a task; it was a way to bond and work together. And as we dove into it, the mood lightened, and the sense of camaraderie grew stronger.

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THE MYSTERY OF THE PURPLE SAREE

The collage project was in full swing. A group of five volunteers—Pavni, Saurabh, Mayur, Akinchan, and I—had created a separate WhatsApp group to manage the task. I was responsible for collecting photos from ten students. It was a challenge, especially since I had never met these people in person and only had their numbers.

“Hey everyone,” I typed into the group chat, “I’m collecting photos for the collage. Could you please send yours by today?”

Most people responded quickly. Messages flew back and forth, and the collage started to take shape. But as the hours ticked by, I noticed that photos from one student were still missing.

Determined to track this person down, I sent a message to the number: “Hi! Can you please share your photo for the collage? Thanks!”

The reply came almost instantly: “Hey Dev, give me a minute. I’m sending it to you now.”

A few moments later, a photo popped up on my screen. I stared at it, captivated. The girl in the picture was wearing a breathtaking purple saree. It was clear this was a special occasion—probably a farewell from her class 12th. Her curly hair framed her face beautifully, and her eyes were deep and mesmerizing. The saree added a touch of traditional grace, and her whole demeanor spoke of elegance and poise.

I was about to type a thank-you when I noticed a new message: “Hi, I’m Avantika. Sorry for the delay. How’s the collage coming up?”

“Hi Avantika! The collage is coming together well. Thank you so much for sending your photo. It’s beautiful!” I replied, feeling a strange but

comforting connection through the screen.

As I looked at her photo again, I felt a strange, unplaceable emotion. The grace and warmth she exuded seemed almost unreal. Her image added a touch of real charm to my otherwise dull online world. Even through the screen, she made the collage project feel more meaningful and gave me a glimpse into the diverse experiences each student brought to Christ University.

“Are you excited for college to start?” I asked, trying to bridge the gap between our digital interaction and the real world we were both missing.

“Definitely! It’s strange starting this way, but I’m looking forward to meeting everyone in person someday,” Avantika responded.

Her words echoed my own feelings. Even though we hadn’t met face-to-face, her photo and our brief conversation made the experience feel a bit more personal and real.

Sitting in the balcony on that rainy day in Goa, I smiled as I thought about how each photo and each conversation was a step toward building something meaningful. I felt a bittersweet longing for the moments I was missing and the connections I was just beginning to understand. It reminded me that while technology had brought us closer in some ways, it had also kept us apart. The journey was unusual, but it was full of unexpected beauty and connection.

As the writer Anaïs Nin once said, “***We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are.***”

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THE DEFENDERS AND THE UNEXPECTED TWIST

Avantika was different. The only one from a science stream in our class of commerce students. And, naturally, that didn't go unnoticed.

One day in our WhatsApp group, Saurabh, the joker, couldn't help himself.

"Science student in a commerce college? Lost on the way to IIT, Avantika?" he typed, adding a row of laughing emojis.

I saw the message and waited. This was going to be interesting.

Avantika fired back almost immediately, "Better lost and learning than stuck in one place forever!" I could feel the bite in her words, even through the screen.

Saurabh, never one to miss a beat, replied, "Right, because balance sheets are sooo adventurous!"

But before I could chuckle, a new player entered the game. Manvit, a guy I hadn't even noticed before, suddenly chimed in.

"Chill, Saurabh," he typed. "It's not cool to judge someone for their choices. We're all here to learn, aren't we?"

Whoa. Where did that come from?

Saurabh, caught off guard, quickly replied, "Hey, man, just kidding around."

But Manvit wasn't having it. "Yeah, well, keep it friendly," he shot back.

The group chat was buzzing with all sorts of reactions—thumbs-ups, laughing emojis, even a few popcorn GIFs. I was glued to my screen,

wondering what was going to happen next.

Avantika finally broke the tension. “Thanks, Manvit, but I’ve got this.”

Manvit responded, “I know. Just didn’t like the vibe.”

And that was it. A simple exchange, but it left me scratching my head. Did they know each other? Was this just random? The guy defending her like he was in some courtroom drama? It felt... unexpected.

In the days that followed, I noticed them chatting more. A comment here, a reply there. I kept telling myself I’d find the right moment to jump in, maybe even ask if they knew each other. But I never did. I kept watching from the sidelines, a spectator in my own story.

And maybe that was my biggest mistake.

Suddenly, my phone buzzed, and RKD’s (Rahil) name flashed on the screen. I opened the message to find: “Hey, I got into Christ!”

I stared, astonished. RKD, my best friend, known for his unusual crushes on women who were at least fifteen years older than him, was joining me at Christ.

With two people leaving, he had managed to get in. It felt like a sitcom moment: the guy who was always falling for teachers was finally getting his wish. I could already picture the next three years: endless debates about who was “hot” and who wasn’t, punctuated by RKD’s classic lines about “mature” ladies.

Laughing at the absurdity, I thought, “If this doesn’t make for a wild ride, I don’t know what will!”

It’s six in the evening, and I’m down to the last few puffs of my cigarette and I was torn between diving into the mounting pile of assignments or losing myself in memories.

Just then, Manav called. ‘Hey, let’s step out. It’s a beautiful evening. How about a break?’

Manav is a unique character. His thoughts are so original that he’s the only person I’ve met who goes to bed at exactly 11 PM, as if his life depended on it. A friend from my B-school days at IIM GOA, he’s also a

Christite, though a year ahead of me. A big-time procrastinator but guy had the discipline of a monk, quite contradictory, isn't it?

The invitation felt like a lifeline. I grabbed my jacket and headed out. As I left the balcony where I'd been lost deep in my thoughts, I realized how much has changed since those online days. Though life has moved on, the memories from that time still bring jolts in my heart, bringing both smiles and tears. Sometimes, the past feels like a comforting friend, reminding me of how we've all grown.

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SCOOTY RIDES AND UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTERS

I went out with Manav on his so-called scooty, which, to be honest, was barely holding itself together.

“Manav, I’m telling you, if this scooty breaks down one more time, we’re gonna have to start walking,

“Ah, come on! It’s not about the ride, it’s about the adventure!” Manav replied, grinning from ear to ear.

Soon I realized that I had forgotten my college ID and almost panicked but then remembered: senior privileges. I flashed my most charming smile at the guard bhaiya and said, “Bhaiya, bas 5-minute mein aa raha hoogn.” He waved us through with a knowing smile.

As we stopped for tea and a cigarette, Manav and I delved into our usual deep, philosophical conversation. It was mostly about how IIM GOA seemed like it was auditioning for the role of “Worst Managed B-School” while still being one of the best in the country. I said, “Yaar, is college ka tagline change krke “Where learning never stops” se change karke “where learning happens ho jana chahiye,” and Manav bursted out laughing.

Our conversation drifted from IIM Goa quirks to the universal truth about cigarettes: “A cigarette is a temporary escape from reality, but also a reminder of your lack of control.” We shared a laugh about how sometimes a cigarette feels like the best friend who’s always there for you—even if it’s not the healthiest relationship.

To balance the ill-effects of my smoking and also to fuel my passion, we headed to the badminton court. I used to be pretty good at badminton—or

at least, I liked to think so. The game was my escape, my way of feeling alive and competitive. But then cigarettes crept into my life, and my footwork became less about finesse and more about fumbling with a smoke in one hand. It was as if I'd traded in my shuttlecock for a pack of "cancer sticks," as my friends liked to call them.

I noticed a girl standing by the badminton court. At first glance, she looked oddly familiar — curly hair, pink T-shirt, black trousers, and pink shoes. "Is this déjà vu, or am I just seeing a ghost from the past?" I thought to myself.

She seemed to be waiting for her friends, and I couldn't help but wonder, The girl is clearly obsessed with pink.

I approached her and said, "Excuse me, are you waiting to play? Want to join us?"

She turned around, and I froze for a second. As I noticed her big, expressive eyes and her broad, gentle face. She reminded me so much of Avantika. Her curly hair framed her face in a way that added to her charm, bouncing with every movement as if it had a life of its own. There was something captivating about her, a quality that went beyond mere physical appearance. She had a smile that could light up a room, and her presence felt like a breath of fresh air.

"Yes, I'd love to join," she said with a bright smile. She introduced herself as Arushi, and we started our match. Arushi was a decent player, and we managed to win the game. Even though my footwork was a bit rusty—thanks to a few too many cigarettes—I enjoyed the game.

After the match, we chatted casually. Her warm smile and the sparkle in her eyes made every word feel genuine, and I found myself appreciating the simple pleasure of her company. I realised that we had a lot in common,

It was feeling like an old wine in a new glass. I couldn't help but recall that Avantika's dad had also been with Punjab National Bank. Arushi's resemblance to Avantika was uncanny—her big eyes, broadhead, and even her smile. It was as if the universe was serving me a familiar vintage under a different label.

We continued chatting, and I learned that Arushi was new to the college scene. I gave her some friendly advice. “Look, the secret to surviving college is simple: just act like you’ve got it all together while you’re secretly Googling everything. Works like a charm!”

Arushi chuckled, “I’ll keep that in mind. So, basically, fake it ‘til you make it?”

“Exactly!” I replied, laughing. “It’s a timeless strategy. Works in college, and apparently, in life too.”

After exchanging contact details with Arushi, she left the court with a smile, and I found myself lingering there, staring at my phone screen. A strange mix of excitement and unease swept over me. I scrolled through WhatsApp, and there it was again, the message I couldn’t escape: “***Can we be strangers again?***” It had come 5 hours ago.

My heart ached again, and a familiar sense of dread settled in. The person who had sent this message was someone I’d known for four years. Four years of shared memories, of laughter, of late-night confessions, of everything and nothing. And now, that person wanted to undo it all, to go back to square one, as if none of it had ever happened.

Was this my fault? Did I miss a sign? Was there something I could have done differently? My mind was in a loop of ‘what ifs’ and regrets.

I couldn’t help but wonder, “Should I say sorry? But what for? What did I even do? I had invested everything, every little bit of myself.

I was lost in the whirlwind of my thoughts when Manav interrupted and told me, “Let’s go”

“Everything okay?” he asked, realizing something was not okay with me.

I managed a weak smile. “Yeah, just dealing with some stuff.”

He nodded, sensing that I wasn’t ready to talk about it. “Alright, man. Let’s get out of here. I need to head back to my room anyway.”

Walking back with Manav, I couldn’t shake the feeling that the universe had a funny way of sending reminders of the past. Whether it was Arushi’s

resemblance to Avantika or the shared experiences that connected us all, life had a way of making old memories resurface in unexpected ways.

Manav, sensing my reflective mood, quipped, “Yaar, jo bhi he, Itna deep mat soch.”

And, of course, this is exactly why I sometimes have a grudge against people whose names start with M.

I couldn't help but think, “Sharing your emotions with a guy is like trying to explain the plot of *Inception* to a three-year-old—confusing, messy, and mostly leaves everyone frustrated. That's why every guy needs a female friend. They're the ones who can actually decode our emotional state and help us sort the mess without making us feel like we're just flailing around in the dark.

We had just come back to our room—our “cluster,” to be precise. One of the few perks of doing an MBA at IIM Goa was getting to choose who lived next door or across the hall.

Being in the second year, we were supposed to have some privileges—or so they claimed. Our cluster was made up of four guys: Priyam, Abhay, Manav, and I. Nothing particularly glamorous about it—just four survivors in this B-school jungle, where every day felt like an unscripted episode of a reality show that none of us had auditioned for.

I laughed in my mind; The cluster system was a mixed blessing. On one hand, we got to choose our neighbours, which meant we could avoid living next to the overzealous kids who were always ready to recite Porter's Five Forces at 3 a.m. On the other hand, we had... well, us.

Tonight was one of those nights when there wasn't much to do, aside from stressing about a case study due in less than 24 hours. So, naturally, we finished off a bottle of Old Monk. “Goa is a drinker's paradise,” I proclaimed, holding up the empty bottle like I'd just won a trophy. “250 bucks for this magic potion? Forget ROI; we've got rum!”

Manav, sprawled across his bed, grinned. “Forget the fees, man. The real ROI of an MBA in Goa is the cheap booze and sunsets.”

He turned to me with that familiar look, the one that said, ‘Give me something good.’ “So, what's next?” he asked, probably expecting me to

unveil some grand plan.

I shrugged, “Next? Just get placed. That’s the plan. Keep whining till we get a job offer decent enough to explain to our parents why we paid 20 lakhs. I mean, I got in here with a solid 91.10 percentile. And for what? Did all that just to be in this MBA circus where we’re mastering the fine art of making PowerPoints look like strategic masterpieces.

He nodded, “Or at least hoping the placement office has enough feni to get us through the madness of Day Zero.”

I replied, “Or at least hoping that the companies that come here don’t ask too many questions beyond ‘Tell me about yourself’—because we’re all running out of creative answers for that one. **And besides**, who needs originality when you’ve got ChatGPT to copy-paste your way through?”

He chuckled. “True. And let’s be honest, we’re all here just pretending to learn the secrets of management while really just figuring out how to live on caffeine, cheap liquor, and instant noodles.”

We both burst into laughter, knowing full well that was the mantra of every MBA student on this campus.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. I groaned inwardly, already anticipating the corporate smile and pleasantries I’d have to muster up. Who could it be now? Another MBA soldier probably looking for some sort of alliance or just a place to crash. I opened the door, prepared for the usual pleasantries, but was relaxed to see that it was Priyam.

I thought, “Oh, it’s him. Guy doesn’t drink, doesn’t smoke—sometimes I wonder, **‘Yeh banda oxygen waste kyun kar raha hai?’**”

Party chal rahi hai kya?” Priyam asked enthusiastically, though it was clear he wasn’t here for the booze.

Manav looked up, barely containing his laughter. “Nahi yaar, mujra chal raha hai! Aaja dance karle!” he said, playfully mocking the excitement of college parties.

Priyam, who was also in our cluster and a fellow Christite (yes, we had three of us in the same cluster, quite the coincidence), had this knack for bringing the most random energy into our otherwise mundane lives.

Despite the fact that our batches were different and I joined Christ University just as Priyam was getting his graduation degree, it was clear that he was still the life of the cluster.

“Wese bhi Dev ko dekh ke toh lagta hai mujra hi chal raha hoga!”, Priyam mocked me.

I thought to myself, “Yeh zinda kyun hai?”

I turned to him and said, “Bro, I passed out in 2023 and joined this jail—sorry, I mean MBA—in 2023.

But despite the playful banter and his seemingly endless energy, Priyam’s presence was a reminder that even in the chaos of MBA life, there were moments of camaraderie and absurdity that made it all worthwhile.

Eventually, we all crashed for the night, each of us went back into our rooms with a mix of useless gossip and half-hearted attempts at sleep. As I drifted off, I glanced at the clock—it was already 5:10 a.m.

But as soon as I closed my eyes, that message popped back into my mind. Although I was half-drunk, I couldn’t shake the thought of it.

“It takes the consent of two to build a relationship, but only one’s decision to shatter it,” the quote echoed painfully in my mind, hitting me like a sledgehammer.

I set ten alarms, hoping to wake up on time. The plan was ambitious: 7:15, 7:20, 7:25, and so on. I figured that if I set enough alarms, I might actually wake up. If not, at least my room would have a symphony of blaring tones to kickstart the day—whether I wanted it or not.

I woke up around 8:25 a.m., feeling the full impact of a hangover, rushing to brush my teeth and get myself prepared for a lecture. I always wondered why teachers were so obsessed with 9 a.m. classes. As I hurriedly got ready, I saw Priyam lounging in the common area.

“Yaar, Priyam, iss prof. ko bol yaar, 9 baje kon lecture rakhta hai?” I complained.

As we both rushed through our morning routine, it was clear that in the world of MBA life, some things were just too absurd to make sense.

I was barely functioning, having dragged myself into class all hungover. As usual, we managed to claim the last seats in Paddy Sir's lecture.

Paddy Sir's lecture had a soothing quality to it, with his voice carrying a gentle rhythm that created a dangerously calming atmosphere. It felt as if his tone was designed to encourage relaxation rather than alertness, making it all too easy to doze off.

As we settled in, the first repeated question of the day came up, one I had heard in almost every lecture over the past 22 sessions. "Had your breakfast? What was today's menu?"

Priyam, brimming with energy despite the early hour, eagerly answered. "Yes, sir! Full of energy," he said, "It was aloo paratha!"

I looked at Priyam with a mix of admiration and confusion. How did he manage to look so vibrant after barely any sleep and a breakfast that, while classic, seemed unlikely to fuel such boundless energy?

Meanwhile, as Sir continued with his smoothly delivered lecture, it was clear that his calming presence was more likely to encourage drowsiness than to keep me awake and engaged.

Suddenly, my phone buzzed. It was a call from Mahesh Sir, a professor from Christ University. It had been over a year since we last spoke, so I was puzzled by the call. However, taking the call in the middle of Sir's lecture wasn't an option. I decided to wait until the lecture ended, planning to call Mahesh Sir back after the class.

The lecture dragged on, and I anxiously checked the clock. Finally, at 10:15, the lecture wrapped up, and I made a beeline for the exit. My mind was already set on having the same breakfast Priyam had enjoyed—something hearty to revive me from this morning's struggle.

I finally had my breakfast, and the remnants of my hangover were beginning to fade. As I settled into a more alert state, I remembered that I needed to call Mahesh Sir back.

When I dialed his number, he greeted me with his usual warmth. "Good morning, Mr. Dixit!"

I reciprocated the greeting with the same enthusiasm, “Good morning, Sir!”

He asked how everything was going, to which I replied, “It’s good, Sir. Everything’s going well.”

Mahesh Sir quickly got to the point. “We’re planning an alumni meetup in January, and I wanted to see if you could schedule your plans around that. Your presence would be much appreciated.”

I smiled and assured him, “Of course, Sir. I’ll be there.”

After ending the call, I felt a sense of relief and satisfaction, knowing I had taken care of this important task.

I had only one lecture for the day, so I scurried back to my room for a much-needed 6-hour nap, hoping to catch up on some lost sleep. As I was settling in, my phone buzzed with a text from Pavni.

“Are you planning to come?” She asked. “I hope Mahesh Sir called you. At least he thinks I’m important to Christ!”

Just then, my phone rang. It was Pavni. “Hey, did you get the call too?” she asked.

“Yep, he did. I guess we’re the special ones now. I told her I’d be there—mostly because I want to show off how well I can pretend to be a responsible adult.”

“Definitely. I’m pretty sure Mahesh Sir sees us as some kind of ‘legendary alumni’—you know, the ones who survive on caffeine and good intentions.”

We both laughed, knowing that in the end, our importance might be exaggerated, but at least we had a good story to tell.

After the call with Pavni, I lit up a cigarette and checked my phone. Opening WhatsApp, I saw the message still waiting for a reply—a glaring reminder of the emotional turmoil I had been trying to escape for the past day.

Each time I saw the message, it was like a persistent nudge, forcing me to confront the whirlwind of emotions I had been dodging.

With a heavy heart and tears threatening to spill, I typed out my response: **“If being strangers is what you need to find your happiness, then I’ll step back. I just want you to be at peace, even if it means losing a part of myself.”**

I hit send and looked at her name saved in my phone—Tam. I had always called her that, a tender nickname that felt like a secret between us, a small piece of affection that meant the world to me.

The cigarette in my hand provided a brief calm, a momentary escape from the chaos swirling in my mind. But even as I took a drag, the thoughts persisted, relentless and unyielding.

Each puff seemed to draw me closer to her memories, the times when everything felt simpler, yet infinitely more complicated. I murmured to myself, “I hope we never meet again.”

I found myself pondering whether she was my second biggest mistake or merely a fleeting happiness in the grand scheme of life. The weight of the memories was heavy, and I couldn’t help but reflect on the times I had left behind.

Amidst this sea of reflection, I remembered that I was nursing a hangover and desperately needed a six-hour nap. Yet, sleep seemed impossible as my mind was tangled in swirling memories and unresolved feelings. Even though I was exhausted, I couldn’t escape the flood of thoughts dragging me back to the past. I took one last drag from the cigarette, flicked it away, and braced myself to dive back into the story. The haze of the past days slowly cleared, and I found myself drawn to the moments I had left behind.

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NEW FACES AND UNSEEN CONNECTIONS

With a deep breath, I exhaled. I was ready to reconnect the dots, to pick up where I had left, and to understand the path that had led me here.

Thinking about it made me chuckle, especially when I remembered our online classes. Despite our best efforts to look engaged, the reality was far from different. Our webcams were always on, creating the illusion of attentiveness, but our WhatsApp group was a flurry of jokes, memes, and random chatter. The disparity between our polished Zoom appearances and our actual interest levels was contradictory.

One day, during a particularly monotonous lecture, I noticed a new face on the Webex screen—a girl who I’d never seen before in any of our previous classes. I thought to myself, “Who’s this? Did she just crash our class, or is she part of some secret club of elusive students?”

Maybe she was a latecomer. The more intriguing detail, though, was the empty seat next to her. It made me wonder if she was there to occupy the final vacant spot left by two students who had left Christ, with Rahil filling one seat and this girl possibly the last one. Maybe she was the final piece in our virtual seating puzzle!

Our unofficial chat was quickly filled with messages like, “Who is she?” and “Has anyone seen her before?” No one had an answer, so I took a closer look at the screen.

Without missing a beat, I typed in the chat, “I guess her name is Tanishka.”

In the end, the real lesson of the online class wasn't about the course material—it was about keeping track of who was who, even when the lecture seemed to blur into the background of our ever-expanding digital social life.

I made some online friends, Pavni and Saurabh, who were like a breath of fresh air in my otherwise dull digital world. Pavni was always bubbling with ideas for extracurricular activities, dragging us into all sorts of virtual fests and events. Saurabh was our go-to guy for navigating Manri Ma'am's tricky lectures—our half-hour crush who somehow made those boring sessions a bit more bearable.

Even though I really wanted to join in on these fun activities with Avantika, I never had the courage to say “Hi” or ask her to join. I kept thinking that she and Manvit must have some kind of chemistry, and I didn't want to be the awkward third wheel, the “kabab mein haddi.” So, I stayed in the background, imagining how different things could have been if I'd had the nerve to reach out.

A few days later, I realized that everyone seemed to be finding their own romantic connections. Pavni, with her usual flair, dropped the bombshell that she'd received a proposal. Saurabh and I were left staring at her on the GMeet screen, our faces a perfect blend of shock and confusion.

“Seriously?” I thought, feeling a mix of envy and amusement. “Online love? How does that even work? Here I am, struggling to find the courage to say ‘Hi’ to Avantika.”

Pavni mentioned she hadn't accepted the proposal yet, which only added to the whirlwind of emotions I was navigating. It felt like everyone was on a quest to find their soulmate or at least a hookup buddy for the next three years, while I was still fumbling in the background. It was both funny and cringe, seeing everyone else getting into relationships while I was still trying to figure out how to talk to Avantika.

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BIRTHDAY SURPRISES AND UNSPOKEN WISHES

As the days turned into weeks, the monotony of online classes, assignments, and endless Google Meets began to fade into a routine.

The once-novel experience of virtual learning had become a regular part of life, with Saurabh, Pavni and I, finding solace in our digital gatherings. These meetings were our sanctuary—a place where we could momentarily escape the pressures of academia and indulge in laughter, casual banter, and camaraderie.

In the midst of this routine, an intriguing revelation came to light: Saurabh was also navigating the turbulent waters of online romance. Despite his numerous attempts and a string of proposals, he was yet to find a match. It was both heart-wrenching and strangely amusing to witness his ongoing search for love. Each story of rejection added a layer of shared experience to our group's dynamic, blending melancholy with a touch of humour.

Then, as the calendar pages turned, October approached with its crisp air and vibrant colours, heralding my birthday month.

On October 13th, around 11:55 p.m., I was lying in my bed, mindlessly scrolling through reels on my phone, the usual late-night ritual. Suddenly, a notification popped up on my screen: “Jaldi se ye meeting join kr!” It was from Pavni. I sat up, immediately feeling a rush of excitement and curiosity.

Without wasting a second, I grabbed my laptop and quickly opened it, my fingers almost fumbling over the keys. As the clock struck midnight, I joined the Google Meet, and the atmosphere was electric. Pavni and

Saurabh had arranged a Google Meet to celebrate my birthday, about 10-12 classmates were already there, their faces popping up on the screen one by one. Complimented by a heartwarming video of mine. The video was a testament to our journey together, capturing our shared moments, inside jokes, and the quirky incidents that had marked our time.

Others chimed in with their wishes too—laughing, joking, and making the virtual room feel a little warmer. Despite all the noise and chatter, my eyes kept darting to the participants list, waiting for one particular name to appear.

Noticing my distraction, Pavni nudged me with a sly smile. “You’re waiting for her, aren’t you?”

I shrugged, trying to play it cool. “Maybe...”

Saurabh chuckled and said, “Do you want me to give Avantika a call?”

Before I could respond, Pavni, ever the bold and proactive friend, interjected. “Don’t even think about it,” she said with a hint of a smile. “If you ask, she might never show up.”

Pavni grabbed her phone with a determined look. “Don’t worry, I’ll handle this,” she declared, scrolling through her contacts. “If anyone can convince her, it’s me.”

She dialed Avantika’s number, glancing over at me with a wink. “Let’s see if she picks up,” she whispered, as I held my breath, waiting to see if she’d join the celebration.

Pavni’s call rang only for a moment before Avantika picked up. I watched her closely, unable to hear Avantika’s voice on the other end, but I could see Pavni her mic was unmuted.

“Hey, Avantika! It’s Dev’s birthday today,” she said, grinning wide enough to stretch across the screen. “We’ve set up a Google Meet to celebrate. Do you want to join us?”

I sat there, my eyes fixed on Pavni’s face, trying to read every little reaction. I had no idea what Avantika was saying, but I was hanging on to every second, my mind racing with the possibilities. I hadn’t ever talked to

her properly, hadn't even seen her beyond her profile picture. Still, there was this strange pull, a flutter of hope that she might just say yes.

Pavni hung up the call, flashing a quick, triumphant smile in my direction. My heart was racing, my palms suddenly a bit sweaty. She was coming. Avantika was actually joining the call.

I felt a rush of happiness, an involuntary grin stretching across my face. My heart skipped a beat. I didn't know why it mattered so much or why I was this excited, but it did. And I couldn't help but feel that maybe, just maybe, something special was about to happen.

Just two minutes later, a notification popped up on the screen: "Avantika Sharma has joined the call." My heart skipped a beat. There she was, in real-time, right in front of me.

"Happy Birthday, Dev!" she said with a warm smile.

I felt my face heat up as I replied, "Thank you," trying to sound casual, but I could sense the awkwardness in my own voice.

Almost immediately, the teasing began. Akinchan grinned and said, "Ahh, din ban gaya bhai ka!" Everyone else burst into laughter, throwing in playful remarks that made no sense to Avantika.

Avantika looked around, a bit puzzled, trying to figure out what was going on. She smiled politely but it was clear she had no idea why everyone seemed so delighted, why all eyes were darting between her and me. The whole call knew—or thought they knew—about my so-called "crush." Maybe it was just an infatuation, but whatever it was, it had become the worst-kept secret among my friends.

As the clock ticked towards 1 a.m., the Google Meet session continued with some fun chat. Chirag, one of our classmates, even got in on the action, mimicking Monika Ma'am's distinctive tone as we pretended to roast her in good humour. The room filled with laughter as everyone enjoyed the light-hearted moment.

Soon after, the everyone began to leave as well, each one wishing me a happy birthday once more before exiting the call.

Eventually, the list of attendees was reduced to just a few. Avantika was still there, but I couldn't muster the courage to make eye contact. I focused on the quiet screen, savouring the birthday cheer as everyone finally signed off, leaving me alone with the echoes of the night's celebration.

After the meeting ended, I picked up my phone and headed to bed. I glanced at the notifications, The BCOM-B Unofficial group chat was overflowing with "Happy Birthday Dev" messages. It seemed like every member had chimed in, adding their own touch to the birthday wishes.

Scrolling through WhatsApp, I saw countless birthday messages from school friends, many of which seemed like mere continuations of previous conversations, almost as if they were just following the trend of birthday greetings. It felt like a routine yearly exchange, with everyone sending their obligatory wishes.

Among the notifications, I noticed one from an unknown number. Curiosity piqued; I opened the chat to find a birthday wish from someone I didn't recognize.

A mix of confusion and intrigue washed over me. Who could this be? I wondered, trying to figure out the mystery behind the anonymous birthday wish.

I replied with a simple "Thank you."

I then typed out another message: "Do we know each other?"

Suddenly, a reply popped up. "No, we don't know each other," came the response. "Hi, I'm Tanishka."

I remembered her as the last person to join our class—the one who had appeared out of nowhere, in our boring Webex meeting.

We had a brief conversation about how the classes were evolving and how she was new to such a setup especially as she joined in late.

Anyway, I heard that the Karnataka government approved hybrid learning, so we'll be there in December.", I said.

She replied, "Yeah, I've heard that too. Online classes feel more like a background soundtrack while we scroll through memes and pretend to be engaged."

I smiled and thought, “Yeah, that’s pretty much what I do too.”

I replied, “Yeah, you’re right.”

Our conversation continued briefly about college assignments, but soon we wrapped up. I said, “Same here, Tanishka. It was really nice talking with you. Let’s keep in touch and help each other out.”

We wrapped up the conversation with a friendly “Bye!” and a wave emoji.

I suddenly noticed that the cigarette was almost gone, just the bud between my fingers.

It was that iconic conversation that dragged me into a storm I never saw coming. A storm that still raged inside me, pulling me apart, leaving me stranded somewhere between what was and what could have been **“If only that birthday wish had never come... if I had never opened that message,”** I murmured to myself, as if wishing could undo the past.

But regret never changes the past; it only makes the present harder to bear. And in that moment, all I wanted was to forget... to unfeel. But how do you unfeel something that still feels so deeply?

I stared out at the fading daylight through the window, feeling the pull of the night ahead. The noise of the world seemed far away, and I was alone again with my thoughts.

Suddenly, I heard the all-too-familiar ding from my phone—the Microsoft Outlook notification that every MBA student has come to despise. Honestly, who actually likes that sound? It’s like they designed it specifically to disturb whatever tiny shred of calm we have left.

I picked up my phone, squinting through the headache, and saw an email: *“Pre-Placement Talk scheduled at 2 PM for students without classes today.”* Great. Just what I needed—an invitation to sit in a room with a bunch of overly enthusiastic recruiters, nodding like we’re all in sync, pretending to be the “ideal candidate.” Attached to the email was a list of students who were **“fortunate”** enough to be chosen for this delightful event.

With a sigh, I clicked on the Excel file. I typed “Dev” in the search bar. Just once, no need to check further. No one else on this campus has the audacity to share this name with me. And, of course, there it was—highlighted in bright yellow like some kind of prize I’d won. Fantastic.

I groaned. “I don’t want to go. I just want to sleep.” But no, they just had to drag us out for these pre-placement talks, making us parade around in western business formals with clean-shaven faces. Seriously, who even made that a rule? The thought of it made me grumble, “Beard is the jewellery of men!”

Two hours to go.

“Man, I’m in a hungover... I can’t deal with one more thing today. Paddy sir’s class was enough punishment.”

I flopped back down onto my bed, pulling the blanket over my head like it could shield me from reality. Maybe if I stayed still long enough, the world would forget I existed for just a bit longer.

Man, as much as I wanted to just bury myself under the blanket and pretend this day didn’t exist, the thought of paying a fine—or worse, being debarred from the placement cycle—was enough to make me move.

My dad had taken a loan just to get me here, to see me “placed” in some shiny job with a hefty pay check. Skipping out wasn’t an option.

I dragged myself out of bed, and dug through the chaos that was my wardrobe. After some digging, I found a crisp white shirt that looked presentable and a pair of trousers and then I found my black blazer that I hoped could still pass as “western business formal.”

Then came the part that I dreaded most—my beard. I went to the washroom and stared at my reflection in the mirror, admiring my beard.....The beard looked good, like it always did, adding a bit of edge to my face. It was full and perfectly shaped, the kind of beard that made you look like a rugged adventurer in a suit, rather than someone who just crawled out of bed. “Beard is the jewellery for men,” I grumbled again, trying to convince myself I could get away with just trimming it. But no, clean-shaven was the rule. With a sigh, I grabbed the razor and went to

work, shaving off my dignity with every stroke. The hangover was bad enough; now I had to face the world bare-faced too?

With my face feeling unnervingly smooth and the hangover still showing in my eyes, I trudged towards the auditorium. The sun seemed a little too bright, the world a little too loud. By the time I got there, a long line had already formed, snaking down the hall like a never-ending queue for a new iPhone launch. I stood in line, trying to hide my wince every time someone laughed or spoke too loudly.

Finally, I managed to snag the last seat at the back. Not ideal, but at least I wouldn't have to fake enthusiasm from the front row. Two figures appeared on the stage, fiddling with the mic like they were trying to defuse a bomb. They finally got it working, and one of them leaned in with a bright, overly enthusiastic smile: "Good afternoon, students!"

I rolled my eyes, muttering under my breath, "Good afternoon, my ass..." Their cheery voices boomed through the speakers, making my head throb a little harder. The first guy—with glasses perched on the edge of his nose—launched into a spiel about "opportunities" and "career growth." I could feel my eyelids getting heavier with each word.

The woman with the tight bun and that relentless smile continued, "So, welcome to the pre-placement talk for Globex Corporation. We are a global leader in digital transformation, committed to driving innovation and excellence in all that we do."

Oh great, here we go, I thought, already feeling the impending boredom settle over me. She went on, "Globex Corporation has been recognized as one of the top 50 employees worldwide and has a diverse portfolio that spans from AI and machine learning to cutting-edge fintech solutions. We pride ourselves on our vibrant work culture, our commitment to employee growth, and our innovative spirit."

Then she added, "the importance of networking and how your connections can shape your career trajectory!"

Networking? My brain scoffed. In this state, I was more likely to network with a pillow than a potential employer. I slumped back into my chair, silently begging the clock to move faster.

My head throbbed with each bullet point they listed. The woman jumped back in, “We provide a competitive salary package, comprehensive benefits, and continuous learning opportunities. At Globex Corporation, you’re not just an employee; you’re a valued partner in our journey towards excellence!”

After an hour or so, she said, “Now, we’d like to open the floor to any questions.”

Please, no one ask anything. Please, I silently pleaded, feeling the dull ache in my head starting to spike again. I just wanted this to end so I could drag myself back to bed and let this hangover drown in sleep.

But of course, there’s always that one overachiever in the crowd. A hand shot up almost instantly—a guy from the front row, glasses perched on his nose, looking like he’d been waiting his whole life for this moment.

“Yes, you,” the woman smiled, pointing at him.

“Thank you for the presentation. I was wondering if you could elaborate on how Amtronix plans to integrate ESG principles into its core business model while maintaining profitability in emerging markets?” he asked, his voice filled with the kind of enthusiasm that made me want to throw my chair at him.

I groaned internally. *ESG? Really? Why do you have to ruin this for the rest of us?* But it didn’t end there. One by one, hands started popping up across the auditorium like whack-a-moles—everyone suddenly had something to ask, from detailed questions about market strategies to inquiries about the company’s long-term vision.

Each answer seemed to drag on for an eternity, my head pounding with every second that ticked by. I kept glancing at the clock, praying for a miracle that would speed things up.

Finally, after what felt like a lifetime, the woman up front said, “Thank you all for your wonderful questions. We hope we’ve been able to provide some clarity on who we are and what we stand for. We look forward to engaging with you further during the recruitment process.”

A polite round of applause followed, but I was already halfway out of my seat, ready to make a dash for the door. I managed to weave my way

through the crowd, ignoring the excited chatter around me.

I ran back to my room. Without bothering to change, I collapsed onto the bed. The world felt a little softer now, the headache slightly duller. I let out a long, exhausted sigh, pulling the blanket over my head, and surrendered to the comfort of my pillow.

Finally, peace. The corporate world could wait. For now, all I wanted was sleep.

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ECHOES OF WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN

I woke up to find that it was already 8 PM. My stomach growled, reminding me that I hadn't eaten anything since the morning's Aloo Paratha, and even that seemed like a distant memory. I groggily changed out of the dreaded western business formal—finally free from the corporate attire and rushed towards the canteen.

When I arrived, the familiar smell of Chicken Lal Jhol filled the air. My mouth watered instantly. There was a long line of juniors waiting patiently, but I didn't care. *Seniors have their privileges, right?* I thought, cutting the line without hesitation. A few of them looked at me, but I shrugged it off.

I grabbed a plate and asked the guy at the counter, “Bhaiya, jitna de sakte ho do, bahut bhook lagi hai.” He smiled knowingly, scooping a generous helping of chicken onto my plate. I piled on three or four spoons of rice and made my way to an empty table.

I plugged in my earphones, ready to drown out the day with some music. I opened Spotify, and the first song that played was “Jo Tum Mere Ho” by Anuv Jain. The melody was soft, and the lyrics floated through my ears, “*Pooche yeh tu ki tujhe mein maine kya dekhta hoon, jab chaaron taraf aaj kitne hi saare nazaare hain...*”

The words hit me like a wave, and before I knew it, I found myself opening WhatsApp. My heart sank as I saw the notification—a message from Tam, the person who'd turned my world upside down just days ago. She had replied two hours ago.

“Live your life; don't get stuck on me.”

I'm removing you from Instagram and Snapchat. If you ever need anything, just let me know. I'll always be here for you.”

Good bye and Good luck for your placement

As I read her words, the ache in my chest deepened. The realization that she was now removing me from her digital world felt like a cold, sharp knife twisting in my heart. The memories of our friendship came flooding back—how she used to share everything with me, from the dress she wore to every little detail of her day. The gossip about Christ, the inside jokes, and the bond we had.

Despite being just, a friend from her perspective, she was my one-sided love. For me, our bond meant everything—I never wanted a relationship from her, only this connection that I hoped would last forever. The memories of our friendship came flooding back—how she used to share everything with me, from the dress she wore to every little detail of her day. The gossip about Christ, the inside jokes, and the bond we had, the person I confided in, the one who made my days brighter.

She was the person who taught me to love someone in moderation, to not be a fool by wasting emotions on someone who don't care.

Now, seeing her remove me from her life felt like erasing a part of my own soul. The depth of my feelings, once filled with hope and warmth, now lay in ruins.

I read the words again, and they felt like a punch to the gut. I could almost hear her voice saying it, soft but firm, trying to be kind yet distant. It was like she was telling me to let go, to move on, but I wasn't ready to. Not yet. *How could she just...?*

My chest tightened, and for a moment, feeling breathless. My hands trembled slightly as I put the phone down. The music continued to play, the lyrics weaving into the moment, making it harder to hold back. I felt a sting in my eyes, and before I could stop it, a tear slipped down my cheek. I wiped it away quickly, glancing around to make sure no one noticed. But the canteen was too busy; no one was looking.

I closed my eyes, letting the music and the warmth of the chicken in my mouth offer some small comfort. ***How do you unfeel something that still feels so real?***

I sat there, alone at the empty table, letting the weight of it all wash over me. The words she had typed felt like a finality I wasn't ready for, and yet, I knew I had to face it somehow... **even if it broke me a little more with every passing moment.**

I had been craving the Chicken Lal Jhol all day, my stomach growling in anticipation. The rich, spicy flavors should have been a welcome relief from the haze of my hangover and the emotional storm I was in. But as I took my first few bites, I realized that even this comfort food couldn't soothe me. After only a few spoonful, my appetite disappeared. I felt a peculiar heaviness, as if my heart was too full to appreciate the food in front of me.

The music from Spotify continued to play softly in the background, and the next song was "Besar Rahee Sharabein, Besabar Ye Dil Jo Mera." The lyrics seemed to speak directly to the turmoil inside me: *"Besar rahee sharabein, besabar ye dil jo mera, bevakoof tha tere bina, beqaraar si thi raatein, beshumaar teri yaaden."*

It was as if Spotify had become a silent witness to my heartbreak, echoing the sentiments of loss and yearning that I couldn't escape. The words resonated deeply, amplifying the ache in my chest. Each note felt like a reflection of my feelings, a soundtrack to my sorrow.

I finished my meal and made my way back to my room, each step feeling more urgent than the last. I wanted nothing more than to escape the swirling mess of thoughts and emotions that had been plaguing me all day. As I walked, the night air felt crisp and calming, a gentle contrast to the chaos of my mind.

I finally reached my room, closed the door behind me, and sank into the bed. The comfort of the mattress and the quiet of the room offered a brief solace from the storm.

I lit up a cigarette, letting the smoke curl around me as I tried to escape the chaotic thoughts that swirled in my mind. With a heavy sigh, I opened Instagram to check if she had really removed me from her life. I clicked on the search button and, as the recent searches popped up, I saw her name: Tanishka. My heart raced as I tapped on it.

The profile loaded, and my eyes fell on the blue “Follow” button. Below it, it showed “Followed by Pavni Arora and 71 others.” My stomach dropped; it seemed like the connections were still there, but I felt a pang of disappointment.

I quickly switched to Snapchat, hoping for some clarity. The first person on my list had been her, but the streak was gone. Still, it showed us as best friends. It was as if the connections were frayed but not entirely severed—a bittersweet reminder of what once was.

The cigarette burned slowly between my fingers, the smoke curling up like the remnants of what we once had. I watched as the ember glowed faintly, a dying reminder of the warmth that once existed between us. But now, just like this cigarette, that warmth was fading into ash.

I opened WhatsApp again, her chat still sitting there at the top, mocking me with its silence, I stared at the message, feeling anger simmer beneath the surface. Her words, *“Live your life; don’t get stuck on me,”* echoed in my mind. My fingers flew across the screen as I typed out what I truly wanted to say.

“So, you did it again, huh? Walked away like I was nothing, like I didn’t exist. The **promise she made—“I won’t leave you again”—was broken again,**” Does your ‘goodbye’ make it easier for me to forget, or does it just help you sleep better at night?”

I stopped, my thumb hovering over the ‘send’ button.

But I knew she wouldn’t care. She hadn’t cared when she left before, when she replaced me so easily. She wouldn’t care now. I could send a thousand messages, and it wouldn’t change a thing.

I deleted the message, one letter at a time, until the screen was blank again. Just like me.

I took another drag trying to calm the storm inside me, but it was no use. The pain was too real, too raw. The tears welled up again, and this time, I didn’t fight them. They rolled down my cheeks, each one a silent cry for the love I lost, for the promises that had crumbled into nothing.

“Why me?” I whispered into the emptiness. “Why is it always me who ends up hurt?” My voice broke, and I felt my chest tighten, each breath

coming in ragged gasps. I had given everything, all I had, every piece of myself to this friendship... to this love. But was this it? Was this what I got in return? Was I just destined to be the one left behind, the one who cared too much, who loved too deeply?

Attachment is a strange thing,

I thought to myself. It latches onto you quietly, seeping into the cracks of your being, until it becomes a part of who you are. But when it breaks, when it snaps, it takes pieces of you with it, leaving you feeling hollow, empty, incomplete.

I stamped out my cigarette in the ashtray and wiped away my tears and thought about how it seemed like a cruel joke in the face of my anguish. “*You can’t force someone to love you when they don’t want to,*” I whispered to myself, trying to make sense of it all. **Why do people forget those who once mattered to them when new faces come into their lives?**

I couldn’t help but wonder if this was just the way things were meant to be—some people love hard, and some leave easily.

As the silence settled, my mind drifted back to a different time, a different moment—back to 2020. Life then was a blend of hopeful beginnings and earnest efforts. Tanishka, Avantika, and I were a TriPort, navigating the complexities of CIA assignments and college life.

Our bond was a source of strength and comfort; they were the bread and butter of my journey, the constant support that helped me push through challenges. Together, we tackled every obstacle, laughed at every mishap, and celebrated each small victory.

But now, as I reflected on those days, I realized how pivotal two people had been in shaping my journey, the impact of two key people hit me hard. Avantika had taught me a painful lesson about love’s darker side. Her betrayal wasn’t just a heartbreak; it was a harsh reveal that love can be a facade for manipulation. She didn’t just walk away—she shattered my trust, showing me how someone can use love to deceive and control.

In contrast, Tanishka had been my anchor. She showed me how to love in moderation and perspective. When Avantika’s betrayal left me in pieces, Tanishka was the one who held me together. She dried my tears and

helped me see that life is bigger than one person's hurt. Her support was my lifeline, guiding me through the darkest times.

As I grappled with the weight of these lessons, I couldn't help but wonder: How could someone who seemed so genuine turn out to be so cruel? I thought "meri kya galti thi?" And in the midst of my confusion and pain, I realized there was still so much to unravel and understand.

As I sat there, I could not help but think, "If only I had never met Avantika." If only I had never been drawn into the illusion of her affection. If only I had never been the part of photo collage, the one with her in the purple saree that seemed to symbolize everything I thought I knew about love.

If I had never let her into my world, **if I had never allowed myself to be so deeply entangled in her web of manipulation**, maybe Tanishka and I could have stayed on a different path. Maybe things could have been less complicated, less painful.

But now, these thoughts are just echoes of a past I can't undo. The pain still cuts deep, mingling with the ache of what might have been. As I navigate through this uncertain future, I'm haunted by the ghost of what could have been, a heavy weight that won't let go.

I forced myself to dive back into those memories, the ones I try so hard to avoid. I kept thinking, "What if Pavni hadn't called Avantika on my birthday?" That night had seemed like the pinnacle of joy, the best birthday I could ever have. Little did I know that years later, I would come to regret it so deeply.

I still harbor a grudge against Pavni for that call. It seemed innocent at the time, but it led to a chain of events that would leave me heartbroken. What I thought was a perfect celebration turned out to be a prelude to regret. In 2024, as I reflect on the connections that came and went, I realize how painfully ironic it is that I ended up reaching out to two girls who, one after another, left me behind.

That night of supposed joy has become a stark reminder of how life's most cherished moments can sometimes sow the seeds of future sorrow.

I sighed in frustration, “Ah, Avantika... I hate how much I still think about her.” The name alone was enough to send a wave of anger and regret crashing through me. As I tried to push those thoughts away, I couldn’t help but let my mind drift back to her, to everything that had happened.

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WHEN FLIRTING TURNS TO FEELINGS

I still remember it was October 18th, just four days after my birthday. That night, we chatted endlessly—the kind of night I’d thought was special, only to realize later it was the start of something I would one day regret. It was the night before our last midterm, the dreaded Accounts exam. Of course, with the exam being online, hardly anyone was taking it seriously. Everyone in the group had made plans to cheat—because, well, who actually studies for an online exam?

That’s when I got a message from Avantika, sliding into my DMs with a grin I could almost see through the screen. “So... what’s the cheat code for tomorrow? Need a roadmap!” It made me laugh out loud. I replied with a few ideas, and we went back and forth, building a little plan that was more a joke than a real strategy.

After the exam, she sent me a quick “Thanks!” and somehow, that tiny word sparked a conversation that didn’t stop. We started talking about everything—life, college, her recent move. I asked, “So, where are you from in Rajasthan?” She surprised me by saying, “Oh, I’ve lived in a bunch of places too—my dad’s with Punjab National Bank, so we move around a lot.”

It caught me off guard, and I couldn’t help but smile. “No way, my dad also works at SBI!” I replied. And just like that, it felt like some cosmic signal that we were meant to cross paths. There were so many coincidences, so many things that seemed to connect us. The coincidence seemed almost too perfect, like some invisible thread was pulling us closer.

We started chatting around 8 p.m., and before I knew it, the clock read 4 a.m. The conversation flowed like water, moving from casual banter to

deeper, more personal territory. At some point, I found myself typing, “So, are you dating anyone?”

She replied, “No, I’m single.”

I couldn’t help but tease her, “What about Mavit? He always seemed like your knight in shining armor when Saurabh teased you on the ground.”

She laughed, “Oh, Mavit? No, no. He did propose, but I friend-zoned him.”

I chuckled. “Poor guy,” I said.

Then, she turned the tables, “And what about you? Are you single?”

I couldn’t resist adding a playful comment, “Yeah, I know I’m handsome—guess I’m just a limited edition, not everyone’s lucky enough to get one.”

She laughed, and I decided to keep the banter going. “So, have you dated before?” I asked.

She hesitated for a second and then said, “Yeah, there was this guy, a family friend...”

We laughed, but behind the jokes, something was brewing. The night was turning into something much more than just a random chat.

Then she suddenly asked, “Koi pasand aaya Christ mein?”

I stared at the screen for a moment, wondering if I should be upfront or just tease her a little. I decided to drop a hint instead.

So, I typed, “Well, there *might* be this one girl... she’s got a thing for purple sarees. Makes quite an impression, you know?”

A few seconds later, the typing indicator appeared, and then her message popped up: “Purple sarees? That’s oddly specific.”

I replied, “Yeah, and she has this weird talent for keeping me awake till 4 a.m., talking about... well, basically everything.”

She replied, “Chalo, then you go to sleep, and I will too. It was nice talking to you.”

I stared at her message, a twinge of regret hitting me. *Yaar, faltu ka bol diya*, I thought, over analysing every word I'd just typed. I quickly turned off my data and decided to sleep it off.

When I woke up around 9 a.m., I checked my notifications. There it was—her message: “Can we be friends abhi ke liye? When we meet physically, we’ll see how things go. You have nice eyes, you know... And maybe, I might have had a small crush on you too.

I stared at the screen, my heart doing somersaults. *A crush on me?* I read the message again, just to be sure. Suddenly, all my regrets from the night before felt a little less heavy.

Nice eyes? A smile crept onto my face, and suddenly, I was wide awake.

I suddenly jumped out of bed and rushed to the mirror. I stared at my reflection, leaning in closer, squinting a little, checking my eyes from every possible angle. *Nice eyes, huh?* I mumbled to myself, half-smiling.

I turned my head left, then right, even tried the classic Bollywood “intense look” for good measure. “Maybe she’s onto something,” I chuckled

I grinned at my reflection and thought, “Handsome toh tu hai, yaar... ab validation toh mil chuki hai, aur kitni chahiye?” I puffed up my chest a little, still admiring my own reflection.

“Lagta toh hu main SRK jaisa, bas...” I mumbled with a grin, still staring at the mirror.

I grabbed my phone and, after a moment’s thought, replied, “Friends for now sounds perfect. Let’s see where this goes when we meet in person. And thank you... that was a lovely compliment.”

Feeling a bit more composed, I joined the online class with a small smile, my mind still lingering on her words.

We talked every day, day and night, like there was an unspoken urgency to know everything about each other. Late-night conversations turned into early morning confessions, and every message felt like a step closer. Each notification made my heart race a little faster, and soon, her name became the reason I stayed up late, smiled randomly, and checked my phone a hundred times a day.

A few days later, as Avantika and I were deep in conversation on a Zoom call, she casually mentioned, “Hey, I’d love for you to meet one of my friends. She’s really great, and I think you two would get along well.”

I was intrigued. “Sure, why not? Who’s this friend of yours?” I asked, curiosity piqued.

Avantika smiled and typed a quick message, arranging for a video call. Shortly after, the screen flickered, and I saw a friendly face appear. “Hi! I’m Tanishka,” she said with a warm smile.

I was taken aback for a moment. “Wait, Tanishka? I asked, trying to recall our past conversations.

“Yep, that’s me!” she replied with a laugh. “We’ve heard a lot about each other.”

I had only briefly spoken to Tanishka on my birthday, so I was familiar with her. But as the conversation progressed, it became clear that Tanishka and Avantika had a great friendship. They joked and chatted with ease, and I found myself enjoying the dynamic they shared.

It was clear that she was an important part of Avantika’s life, and as we continued to chat, it became apparent that our circle of friends was expanding in the most unexpected and delightful ways.

As I looked back on it all, it hit me: Two girls are like Oscar-winning actors—’You’re my best friend!’ to each other’s faces, but the second they turn around it’s all gossip and drama.

By December, as the Karnataka government allowed colleges to resume classes in hybrid mode, Avantika and I had grown quite close. It was a shift from the distant acquaintance we once were. As for Tanishka, our connection remained superficial. We were never truly close—our interactions were more about navigating the complexities of our situation rather than forming a genuine bond.

But looking back, I realize how superficial my connection with Tanishka had become. If I’m honest, it seems like Avantika never really wanted Tanishka and me to be close. Maybe she saw Tanishka as a potential rival or simply didn’t appreciate the growing bond between us. Whenever Avantika and I had disagreements or arguments, Tanishka was

there, often diplomatically trying to balance things. Still, it was clear that her loyalty was more with Avantika than with me. Our relationship, in retrospect, felt more like a formality than a true friendship.

In this strange blend of shifting dynamics, December marked a new chapter. The anticipation of starting classes offline seemed like a chance to embrace a fresh start.

As the saying goes, **“Sometimes the people you think are closest to you are the ones who are just good at pretending.”**

I chuckled thinking about those times, reaching for my bottle of Old Monk. This cheap rum has become my personal time machine. It was the kind of drink that students relied on—no-fuss, budget-friendly, and always there to take the edge off, even if it meant dealing with a pounding headache the next morning.

I fumbled for my phone and tapped open my college app. If there was an award for the most inconveniently timed reminders, this app would take home the trophy. “Great, another lecture while nursing a hangover,” I muttered.

I poured myself a drink, then another, and finally a third, preparing for a night of introspection and reckoning. As the alcohol started to do its job, I turned on the speaker and let Anuv Jain’s songs fill the room. His melodies, with their haunting beauty, seemed to echo my own feelings of reflection and regret.

The reality of seeing someone for who they truly were—especially when they had been the center of your universe—was a hard lesson learned. Making someone too important, allowing them to become your sun while you merely revolved around them, had been a mistake I’d learned the hard way.

The night was full of mixed emotions, and I knew a wild ride awaited me.

The flashbacks were just beginning, and I was sure the night would be anything but ordinary.

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A SWEET DECEMBER IN BANGALORE

December finally arrived, and with it, my big move to Bangalore. Ah, Bangalore—the city with some of the finest weather I'd ever experienced. Cool breezes, warm sun, and a beautiful sky. It felt like a fresh start in every sense. I found a PG near Koramangala, tucked away in one of those lanes where the aroma of freshly brewed coffee mixes with the hum of city life. There was something about the air that made it feel different—like I was stepping into a new chapter of my life, a bigger, more complex one.

But this wasn't just about the city—it was about college. When I finally stepped into campus, it hit me. This wasn't the Karan Johar movie kind of college with scenic lawns and endless hangouts. No, this was different.

Here, the most crucial accessory wasn't your phone or a pair of cool sunglasses rather it was your ID card. Lose that, and you'd be treated like a criminal. And the dress code? Forget about casual—formal attire was the law of the land. Shirts tucked in, shoes polished, ties perfectly knotted. If anything, Christ had this weirdly articulate way of reminding you that here, things weren't just serious—they were *professional*. Every morning felt like you were dressing up for a board meeting rather than a lecture.

Walking through the gates, I saw my classmates in real life for the first time—faces I had only seen on Webex, where they were just tiny squares on a screen. In person, everything was different. The atmosphere had a quiet intensity to it. Everyone was focused, driven. It was like the entire environment pushed you to do more, to be better.

There was excitement in the air—students were enthusiastic, borderline obsessed with participation, whether it was in class or the endless events that seemed to pop up. It wasn't just academics; it was

about being the best version of yourself in every sense. I could feel it too—the pull to excel, to push boundaries, and to match the pace of those around me.

Christ was something else entirely—unique in every way. It wasn't just a college; it was a proving ground, a place where you felt the weight of expectation with every step. But that pressure didn't feel suffocating; it felt like a challenge, like an invitation to rise above the ordinary. And I was ready for it.

The anticipation of starting classes in person was already building, but tomorrow was the real game-changer—Avantika was arriving. And so was Tanishka. I hadn't seen either of them since we all got tangled in the web of online classes, and the thought of finally meeting them in person added a different kind of excitement. It wasn't just about beginning offline classes anymore—it felt like stepping into a new phase of our lives, where every unspoken word and fleeting smile would carry more weight.

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THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Before their arrival, I met a couple of classmates I had grown to share good boundaries over the months—Pavni and Saurabh. There was something comforting about them. We'd talked a lot during our Webex sessions, and now, in person it was even easier to slip into conversation. We exchanged pleasantries, laughed about how awkward those tiny video windows had been, and it felt good. Like we'd been here before, only now, it was real.

But the real moment, the one that made my heart race, was seeing Avantika.

The next day, I was standing near the entrance of the campus, casually talking with Pavni and Saurabh when I spotted her. Avantika, stepping out of the car with her parents. She was wearing a pink top and black jeans, simple but perfect. Her hair fell in soft waves, but it was her eyes that left me awestruck.

Her parents were there to drop her off, and somehow, I found myself walking over to greet them. Her mom smiled warmly, and her dad gave me a firm handshake. "How's everything going? All set for this new chapter?" they asked. I nodded, exchanging small talk, but my mind was elsewhere. All I could focus on was Avantika—the way she looked, the way she carried herself. It felt like the perfect moment, like everything was falling into place.

Everything seemed so good. So right.

I shook hands with Avantika and the smile she gave in return was the kind that made everything else fade into the background for a second.

Eventually we decided to head to Block 4, the canteen, where the smell of fried snacks and coffee hung thick in the air. It was a staple hangout spot at Christ—nothing fancy, but just right for catching up. As we sat there, our conversation flowed effortlessly, and pretty soon, we started teasing each other like we always did.

As we were laughing, Avantika's phone rang. It was Tanishka, and with a quick "She's here," we both got up to head toward the gate to pick her up. The moment Tanishka saw Avantika, it was like watching a Bollywood reunion scene, minus the background score. They rushed toward each other like long-lost sisters, hugging so tightly, you'd think they hadn't seen each other in a thousand years.

"Arre, chhod bhi do!" I laughed, watching their never-ending hug that could probably last another millennium.

Finally, they pulled apart. Tanishka turned to me with a polite smile and offered a quick, formal handshake. No warmth, no real connection—just a clear sign that our bond had never really grown. We were still just... there, orbiting around Avantika.

After that, I couldn't help but ask, "So, where are you guys staying?"

Avantika replied "We're in a PG in Koramangala too!" and they were sharing a room together.

I tried to keep my tone casual, but inside, I was buzzing with excitement. "That's where I'm staying as well," I said. The thought of us all being so close, sharing the same little corner of Bangalore, filled me with a quiet kind of joy. It wasn't just about the proximity; it felt like our lives were threading together in some small but significant way. The hustle of the city, the vibrant energy of Koramangala—it was like everything was aligning perfectly.

For a moment, I let myself imagine the days ahead. Random coffee runs, late-night talks, bumping into each other at odd hours—it all seemed so possible now. There was a sense of ease, a comfort in knowing that we weren't just classmates but now, neighbors in this chaotic yet beautiful city.

“Looks like we’ll be seeing a lot more of each other,” I said, flashing a smile that I hoped hid just how much that idea thrilled me.

The next few days were a whirlwind of introductions, campus tours, and trying to find our footing in this new chapter of our lives. I had expected a typical college vibe, but this was something different. Every student seemed eager, enthusiastic, and determined. The environment was infectious, and I found myself swept up in the enthusiasm, even if I still missed the comfort of my old routines.

The days flew by, and soon enough, we were deep into the rhythm of college life. I met new faces, formed new friendships, and learned to navigate the quirks of our academic environment. Amidst all this, Avantika and I fell back into a familiar rhythm. Our conversations were a blend of teasing, laughter, and occasional serious talks about our classes and future plans. It felt like we had picked up right where we left off, with the added dimension of our shared experiences in Bangalore.

But something was different this time. We weren’t just friends anymore—that much was clear. The way she laughed, the way she glanced at me during our conversations, even the way she brushed her hair behind her ear—it was all different. I was drawn to her more than ever, and every little thing about her felt magnified. Maybe it was the fact that I had already admired her from afar during those online classes, but now, in person, she was even more beautiful, even more captivating.

It became impossible to deny the feelings that had been quietly building inside me. I wanted more than just late-night conversations and inside jokes. I wanted to tell her how I felt, to lay it all out there and see if she felt the same way. The idea of proposing to her started to take root in my mind, and it consumed me. But this had to be special—it couldn’t be just another proposal. I had to plan it right.

In my PG room, I paced around, running different scenarios through my head. Should it be simple? Something grand? Avantika deserved something extraordinary. I could feel the excitement bubbling up, but I was also nervous. I didn’t want to rush this.

That’s when I decided to call Tanishka. Maybe she could help me figure out the perfect way to propose. I dialled her number, and as soon as she

picked up, I blurted out, “Hey, Tanishka. I need your help. I’m going to propose to Avantika. I’m sure of it—I’m in love with her.”

There was a pause on the other end. Tanishka’s voice came through, calm and collected, as always. “Are you sure? Take your time before you do anything. Make sure it’s really what you want.”

I felt a flicker of frustration. Why did she always seem so protective of Avantika when it came to me? It was like she didn’t trust me or didn’t believe in what I felt. I wondered for a second, *why doesn’t Tanishka want me to be with Avantika?*

I sat on the edge of my bed, gripping my phone a little tighter. Tanishka’s voice was soft but firm, and it made me pause.

“What do you mean, take my time? I’ve been thinking about this for months now, Tanishka. I’ve liked her since the first day we started talking, and now... now it feels like the right time,” I said, pacing again.

“I know, but sometimes what feels right isn’t always... well, right,” she replied.

“Okay, fine. Thanks for your time,” I said abruptly, feeling more frustrated than before. I hung up and tossed my phone aside.

After a few minutes of sitting in silence, I did what any modern-day romantic would do: I opened YouTube and typed in, *How to propose to a girl*.

The first video that popped up had this guy pulling off some grand gesture with roses and candles.

Arey, yeh sab toh bahut mehenga hai, I thought, shaking my head.

I closed the video and leaned back on my bed, staring at the ceiling. *Yaar, naturally Kuch sochna padega.*

I typed the message, “*Can we meet tomorrow at Ace Café after class?*” and hit send before I could second-guess myself. *Whatever happens, I’ll just say it the best I can,* I thought, feeling a mix of nerves and excitement.

I opened my wardrobe and scanned for a good shirt. Something nice, but not too obvious. I grabbed one, spritzed some of my best cologne, and

with all these thoughts swirling in my mind, I finally managed to fall asleep.

The next morning, I woke up around 7:30, just in time for the 8:30 class. As usual, we had some boring lectures, but my mind was somewhere else entirely. My thoughts kept drifting to what I was about to do.

During the break, Avantika casually asked, "What's up? Why are we meeting at the café? Should we call Tanishka too?"

I quickly shook my head. "No, just you and me," I replied, my heart starting to race a little already.

We met at Ace Café, ordered some coffee, and I could feel my heartbeat speeding up as the moments passed. I tried to act calm, but inside I was anything but.

I was sitting next to her there, staring into her eyes. The world around us seemed to blur, and all I could see was Avantika, more beautiful in this moment than I had ever realized.

Taking a deep breath, I began, "Avantika... naam bhi khubsurat hai... aur aap bhi." My voice trembled slightly, but the sincerity was clear.

"I've been holding onto this for so long," I continued, "waiting for the right moment to tell you. But sitting here with you, I realized... there's never going to be a perfect moment. Because with you, every moment feels right."

I could feel my pulse quickening as I took a step closer, the air thick with the weight of everything I was about to say. "When I first saw you, it was your beauty that attracted me. But the more I got to know you, the more I realized it wasn't just about how you looked. It was about everything. The way you smile when you're lost in thought, the way you light up when you talk about things you love. The way you make me feel like nothing else matters when we're together."

I paused, swallowing the lump in my throat and without any pauses, blurted it out, "Avantika... I love you. Not just in the way they show in movies, but in the way that makes me want to be a better person, for you. I love the way you challenge me, the way you care, the way you make

everything seem a little bit brighter. And I don't want to go another day without you knowing that."

I took her hand gently, holding it as if it were the most precious thing in the world. "I don't know what the future holds, but I know that with you, everything feels possible. So here I am, sitting in front of you, hoping you'll feel the same way. Hoping that maybe, just maybe, I can be the one to make you as happy as you've made me."

Her eyes softened, the world stood still, and in that moment, I knew that no matter what she said, everything was about to change forever.

Before I could delve deeper, I noticed my drink was over. I stared at the glass in front of me, the dim light casting a faint glow around the room. I poured myself another drink, the liquid splashing into the glass, a brief moment of comfort before the thoughts came flooding back.

"If only I'd listened to Tanishka back then," I muttered, half to myself. "She was trying to protect me in her own way, giving me all the signs... but no. I was too blinded by what I thought was love. Too much of a dumbass to see it."

The weight of it hit me then. This wasn't just a memory; it was a reminder of the mistakes I made—the ones that shaped everything after. The Old Monk burned down my throat, but it was nothing compared to the regret simmering inside.

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A RAIN-KISSED CONFESSION

As the alcohol began to work its magic, my thoughts drifted back to that evening in 2020. When Avantika said yes to my proposal, it was a mix of relief and joy. Her words, soft yet firm, had left me in a daze. “I don’t know if it’s love,” she had said, “but you’re someone who helps me enjoy life, a companion I cherish deeply.”

I couldn’t believe it. I had a girlfriend, and it felt like a dream wrapped in the warmth of our shared moments. Yet, Avantika had made it clear—“Let’s keep this personal,” she said. “These are our early days. I want to Savor them without the world’s eyes.”

We left the café, stepping out into the cool night air. It felt like a scene from a movie—just the two of us and a quiet street. It felt like a scene straight out of a movie, complete with a light breeze and the promise of rain.

The night sky seemed to hold its breath as we walked hand in hand.

It was almost poetic, the way the heavens seemed to conspire with our own small fairytale.

Our PG was a twelve-minute walk. Soon raindrops began to fall. At first, it was just a light drizzle, but soon it turned into a steady, gentle shower. The rain made everything feel fresh and new, like a promise of something magical.

We strolled slowly, our hands clasped together, feeling the rain soak through our clothes. The street was almost empty, with only the distant glow of streetlights and the occasional flicker of neon signs. We turned into a particularly isolated lane as the raindrops grew stronger.

We found shelter under the awning of a closed shop, where the only sounds were the rhythmic pattern of the rain that created a curtain of sound that added to the sense of intimacy.

We stood there, our bodies close, the warmth of our breaths mingling in the cool night air. I looked into Avantika's eyes, seeing them shine with a mix of excitement and affection. We were close enough that I could feel her breath on my face, warm and soft against the cool rain.

I tilted my head slightly, closing the distance between us. My fingers gently brushed her wet hair away from her face, my thumb caressing her cheek. She moved closer, her lips just a breath away from mine.

With our faces inches apart, I felt her warm breath mingling with mine. I leaned in, our lips meeting in a slow, deliberate kiss. The rain continued to fall around us, each drop adding to *the sense of intimacy and connection*.

Our kiss began softly, exploring the newness of this moment. Her lips were tender and responsive, matching the rhythm of my own. As we continued, the kiss deepened, becoming more passionate. Soon we left for her PG.

We hadn't uttered a word since the kiss and honestly, it wasn't necessary. The silence between us was comfortable, filled with the kind of understanding that needed no explanation. I watched her disappear inside before turning to make my way back to my own PG.

Once I was back, I took off my soaked clothes, the night's rain still fresh in my mind. I grabbed my phone, wiping off the droplets that got collected on it. For a moment, I just stood there, lost in thought, replaying everything that had happened. The kiss... it was more than I had imagined.

My phone buzzed softly in my hand, but before checking any notifications, I messaged Avantika.

"It was the best kiss I've ever had."

She replied almost instantly: "*Not actually...*"

I stared at the message for a second, not sure whether to laugh or feel embarrassed. Before I could think too much, another message popped up. "*But it wasn't bad either*" I couldn't help but smile at my screen.

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WHEN EVERYTHING FELT LIKE A FAIRYTALE

Days passed, and we found ourselves talking more and more. The classes kept rolling, I was enjoying everything like never before. It felt like I had hit the jackpot—a great college, new friendships, and Avantika. It was like living in a dream.

But they say, *“Even the sweetest dreams have their nightmares.”*

We kept things low-key in college, acting like we were just friends. Even Tanishka, who usually had a sixth sense for these things, was clueless. She’d asked me more than once if I had finally proposed to Avantika, and each time, I’d brush it off with a casual, “No, not yet.” We never really talked much about it, so she never pushed me for more details.

Then, just as everything seemed to be falling into place, the second wave of COVID hit. I hadn’t even had two full months of this “new normal” when life came crashing down again. The campus closed, restrictions tightened, and the world suddenly felt small again, **reduced to video calls and endless texts.**

Before we all headed back to our hometowns, we decided to spend one last day together—just the three of us. It wasn’t some grand plan, just a way to hold onto the time we had left. I invited Avantika and Tanishka to my PG since I had a single room, and it felt more personal than any café or park. We wanted to make the most of the time before heading back to the uncertainty that awaited us with the second wave looming.

That day, something unexpected happened. As we were sitting around, talking about everything and nothing, Avantika casually pulled out a

cigarette. I blinked, completely taken aback. She lit it with ease, taking a drag, and all I could do was stare.

Tanishka didn't react, which made me wonder—had she known about this the whole time? I, on the other hand, had no idea.

“Wait... you smoke?” I finally asked, trying to keep my voice neutral.

Avantika smiled, blowing out a puff of smoke. “Yeah, sometimes. Didn't think it was a big deal.”

It wasn't like I was judging her, but it was strange seeing her do something I had never associated with her. I'd never imagined her as the kind of person who smoked. And to be honest, I hated the smell of cigarettes.

I shifted a little, feeling uneasy but trying to hide it. “I don't know,” I said, feeling a little awkward. “I've always hated the smell.”

She glanced at me, reading my discomfort. “You've never smoked, have you?” she asked, amusement in her voice.

“Nope. Never thought I would. It's just not my thing,” I said, trying to keep the mood light, though the smell was already getting to me.

She shrugged, taking another drag. “Don't worry, I won't force you into anything.”

I smiled, but inside, I was still processing this new side of her. It was like a puzzle piece that didn't quite fit.

Ahh, fuck. Here I am, lighting the sixth cigarette of the day.

I stared at the small flame as it flickered at the tip of the cigarette, the irony not lost on me. Two years ago, I couldn't stand the smell, and now... now it's become a habit I can't shake.

Funny how habits stay, but people always find a way to leave.

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HIDDEN CARDS

The evening was light, easy, and everything we needed. We played UNO, laughter filled the room as we threw down our cards, ordering cheese crust pizza—Avantika's favorite.

"You're cheating!" Tanishka yelled, throwing a pillow at Avantika, who was smugly stacking up her cards.

"I never cheat. I'm just better," she replied, her eyes sparkling with that playful competitiveness.

Everything was perfect—one of those rare moments where you feel like the world is pausing for you, letting you live in it a little longer. We were laughing, teasing each other, and for a while, it felt like nothing else mattered.

But then, I noticed something. Out of the corner of my eye, Avantika's phone lit up. Mehul. That name flashed across the screen, and for a second, the air around me felt heavier. Mehul, her ex. I tried not to let it bother me, tried to focus on the game, but curiosity gnawed at me.

She quickly declined the call, brushing it off like it didn't matter. But there was something in the way she looked at her phone—hesitant, distracted. She kept glancing at it, like she was waiting for something. My mind started racing with questions. Why was he calling her? Why didn't she tell me about it? Were they still in touch? But I didn't ask. Not then. I wasn't sure if I wanted to know the answers.

"Hey, put your phone down," I said, trying to keep it casual. "Focus on the game. We need to gang up on Tanishka, or she's going to win again."

Avantika smiled, setting her phone face down on the table. "Yeah, yeah, I'm here," she said, but her eyes darted back to the screen once more.

She was texting someone—maybe him? —and it was like there was a wall between us, one I hadn't noticed before tonight.

I forced myself to stay in the moment, to keep the mood light. But something had shifted, a small crack that I couldn't quite ignore. Still, I didn't say a word, hoping it was nothing. Just a call. Just a text.

But deep down, I knew something was off.

As the night slowed down, Avantika casually suggested we grab some beer. Now, I had never had beer in my life, but of course, I nodded like a pro. We walked to the shop near my PG, and the moment I stood in front of the fridge, it was like I was trying to crack the final question on *Kaun Banega Crorepati*. I didn't know a single brand, so I just grabbed Budweiser because, well, it sounded familiar—like something I'd seen in a movie once.

We got back to my PG, and of course, Tanishka took charge like she'd been doing this her whole life. She popped open all our bottles with one smooth motion while I stood there, pretending like I knew what was going on. I gave her a nod like, "Yeah, that's how it's done," but inside, I was just thankful she didn't ask me to do it.

"Cheers," Tanishka said, her eyes gleaming as we settled in to watch a movie. The room dimmed, the sound of the film echoing in the background, but our focus wasn't really on the screen.

We were all a little buzzed by then, just enough to feel loose, free. At some point, Tanishka got a call from her parents. She groaned, knowing she'd have to leave. "I better go, or they'll freak out," she said, standing up reluctantly. "My PG's just a three-minute walk, so it's fine."

Avantika and I waved her off, and just like that, we were alone. The buzz of alcohol still hummed in my veins as the silence between us grew heavier. The movie was still playing, but neither of us was really watching anymore. I glanced at Avantika, her face illuminated by the dim glow of the screen, and without thinking, I reached for her, pulling her into an embrace. Her body fit against mine perfectly, as if this moment had been waiting for us all along.

Her eyes met mine, and something unspoken passed between us—a silent agreement that words weren't needed. Our lips met again, but this time, it was different. The kiss was slow at first, delicate, like we were exploring something fragile. Then, the intensity grew, as if all the feelings we had kept bottled up were suddenly free. The beer, the laughter, the warmth of the night—it all blended together into something primal and real.

I pulled her closer, my hands finding her waist, and she responded, her fingers threading through my hair, tugging me nearer, as if she couldn't get enough. Every touch felt electric, like sparks igniting beneath our skin.

We fell backward onto the bed, still tangled in each other. Her breath was warm against my neck as my hands roamed around her back, exploring the curves of her body, pulling her even closer. She gasped softly, her fingers gripping my shirt, and suddenly, there was no room for hesitation, no space between us, just pure, overwhelming need.

The way she kissed me—slow, then fast and desperate—made my heart race. My hands slid under her top, feeling the warmth of her skin beneath my fingers, and I could feel her body tremble against mine. Her hands weren't idle either, tracing the lines of my shoulders, my chest, like she was memorizing every inch of me.

Her lips trailed down my neck, biting and leaving a trail of fiery sensation that sent shivers through me. I pulled her tighter, not wanting the moment to end. Every touch felt amplified, every kiss more intense than the last, as if the world outside didn't matter anymore. The room was filled with the sound of our moans, the quiet hum of desire, and nothing else existed.

After what felt like hours, we finally slowed down. Her head rested on my chest, and I could still feel the lingering warmth of her skin against mine. The silence between us felt comfortable, but my mind was racing, thoughts creeping back in as the intensity of the moment faded.

But as we lay there, reality started to creep back in. The haze of the moment began to lift, and with it, so did the questions. My mind wandered to places I didn't want it to go.

I swallowed, unsure if I should say it, but the words came out anyway, soft and hesitant. “Are you and Mehul still in contact?” I asked, my voice low, but it was enough to break the stillness between us.

She looked at me, a flicker of hesitation in her eyes before she replied, “Yeah, we’re just normal friends. Sometimes we talk because he’s a family friend.”

I frowned, trying to wrap my head around it. “Can an ex really be just a friend?” I wondered aloud, but she just shrugged, clearly unfazed by my curiosity.

Then she asked, “Can I light up a cigarette? You know, a cigarette after sex is something different.”

I raised an eyebrow, half joking, “Seriously? Is it really that special?”

She smirked. “Hand me the pack and the lighter from the table first, and maybe you’ll find out.”

Reluctantly, I passed her the cigarette pack and lighter, watching as she expertly lit it up and took a long, slow drag. She offered it to me again, and despite every instinct telling me no, I figured—why not? One try wouldn’t hurt.

I took the cigarette, trying to act nonchalant, but as soon as I inhaled, my throat caught fire. I coughed uncontrollably, my eyes watering. “Oh god! How do people enjoy this? It’s like licking a car exhaust!”

Avantika chuckled, clearly amused by my struggle. “Not everyone’s made for it,” she teased.

Yeah, no thanks,” I said, shaking my head, still recovering from the aftertaste.

It’s 2024, and I’m sitting here, watching the smoke lazily swirl from my lips, the warm buzz of my sixth peg settling in. Who would’ve thought I’d be this person? Smoking has become essential for me.

I glance at my phone lying next to me, its screen lighting up with notifications. *100+ unread messages*. Group assignments, deadlines, reminders—it’s the MBA life on steroids. I stare at them for a second and swipe them away. Honestly, kabhi kabhi toh mujhe bhi free riding karna

chaiye. Let someone else take the wheel for once. Isn't that what an MBA is all about? Delegation, right?

But then, another notification catches my eye—*Tanishka*. It's a message I've been avoiding for reply, I open it, and there it is:

"Live your life; don't get stuck on me. I'm removing you from Instagram and Snapchat. If you ever need anything, just let me know. I'll always be here for you. Goodbye and good luck for your placement."

I stare at the words for a long moment, letting them sink in. Funny how things change, how people drift. I take another sip, feeling the weight of those words settle in my chest. I know I need to reply, and finally, I do.

"You were the one who taught me not to get stuck on people. And yeah, this time I'm ready for that. All the best for your next two years at St. Xavier's. Take care, Tanishka."

Suddenly, it hit me—I should've just listened to Tanishka's words. If only I had understood what she was trying to say before everything slipped away. Before I made that move, before I... proposed.

But I didn't.

If I hadn't proposed to Avantika, maybe things would have been different. I ended up losing Tanishka not once, but twice, once because of Avantika, and the second... for reasons I still don't fully understand. It's like there was something hidden, something I wasn't meant to know, and now it haunts me.

I slid my phone and glanced at the time—12:00 AM. Ah, 12 already. Who even sleeps at 12 during an MBA? It's practically midday in MBA time. The night was young, and my mind? Restless as ever.

I couldn't stop thinking about it all, so I let my thoughts wander back.

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UNANSWERED CALLS AND UNSPOKEN WORDS

After that night of intense emotions and intimacy, I dropped Avantika off at her PG and returned to mine. The evening's passion and the rawness of our connection still clung to me as I collapsed onto my bed, utterly spent and lost in thought about what the next day would bring.

Our flights were scheduled for midday, and we all headed to the airport together. As I boarded, my mind couldn't help but wander to the past couple of months—so much had happened, and yet, I was ridiculously happy. I thought about how the next two years might play out, excitement bubbling inside me.

But as soon as I landed, the familiar Webex notifications started flooding in. Our college life was back on our laptops—back to virtual reality. Things between Avantika and me seemed perfect, though. We had small fights here and there, but nothing major. Everything felt stable. Except, I didn't have anyone to talk to about it, about us. She made it clear that we were to keep it quiet.

I couldn't even tell Tanishka. She had warned me not to propose to her, and yet, I had. Plus, Avantika and Tanishka were really close. If Tanishka found out, she might tell Avantika, and then... Well, that would be a mess.

Avantika and I used to talk every night. We shared everything, but this one night was different. Her call was busy when I tried her, and I assumed she'd call me back in a few minutes. Two hours passed, and still no word from her. I called again, but no reply. Worried, I messaged Tanishka, asking if she was talking to Avantika, but she wasn't.

It wasn't until three hours later that I learned why. Avantika had been occupied with Mehul, who was struggling with academic pressure. It was a side of her I hadn't seen before—a glimpse into the support she was offering someone else, while I was left in the dark.

As I tried to understand the silence, I couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to this story—more that I was yet to uncover.

Although I was trying to process the idea of an ex remaining friends, it was tough to digest. I was grappling with questions, unsure if I was overthinking or if there was something more to consider.

As I tried to understand the silence, I couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to this story—more than I had already uncovered.

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SECRETS AND SILENCE

The next morning, in the middle of a particularly dull Webex lecture, my phone buzzed. It was Avantika.

“Hey, I’m so sorry for yesterday. You didn’t reply to my texts. Is everything okay?”

I quickly replied, “I told you everything was fine. I hope Mehul is all right now?”

“Yeah, he’s doing better now. He doesn’t really have any friends apart from me, so it was important for me to talk to him.”

I nodded, understanding why she had been preoccupied. “It’s fine.”

After a brief pause, I asked, “We’ve been dating for over a month now. Can I share this with other people, like Tanishka or Pavni or Saurabh?”

She hesitated before replying, “I’m not comfortable with that. I’d prefer to keep it between us for now.”

Our conversation continued, light and casual, and everything seemed normal between us—or at least, it felt that way.

As months passed, I got to know a lot about Avantika’s past and the reasons behind some of her choices. She shared some of her darkest secrets with me—stories of family issues and personal struggles and everything.

Meanwhile, as the pandemic’s second wave was subsiding, the Karnataka government announced that colleges could reopen in hybrid mode. It was a mix of relief and apprehension as we faced the uncertainty of this new phase, trying to adapt to the shifting landscape of our lives.

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THE PRESSING QUESTION?

We decided to schedule a Zoom meeting to tackle the most pressing question of our lives: Should we stay home and wait for the third wave to make its grand entrance, or should we boldly venture back to Bangalore and face whatever comes our way?

Avantika started off with her usual caution, “I’ll only come to Bangalore if it’s absolutely necessary. Otherwise, I’m happy staying cozy at home.”

Tanishka, ever the thrill-seeker, countered with a grin, “I’m going for sure! I’m over this home quarantine life. I need a change of scenery and some actual human interaction.”

I sat there, torn between the comfort of staying home and the pull of the campus life that awaited me. I was itching to escape the confines of my current routine and dive back into the vibrant chaos of college. But should I voice this desire to Avantika, or should I let it slide?

I pondered the dilemma, feeling the tug-of-war between my head and my heart. There was a voice inside me urging me to follow my heart, reminding me, “Listen to your heart, it knows what’s best for you.”

Despite the doubts, I listened to that inner voice. I knew I wanted to embrace every moment of my college experience, to savor the laughter, the freedom, and the camaraderie that awaited. I made my decision: I would go. I wanted to make the most of my college life and experience it fully.

Though I was all set to go, Avantika wasn’t too happy about it. She sent me a text right after the meeting, “Haan, jaa. Muje chhod ke college enjoy kar, main yaha online classes mein hi marti hu. Tu waha maze maar.”

I chuckled at her sarcasm, but deep down, I knew she was genuinely upset. But my mind was made. I wanted to experience college, even if it meant upsetting her a little.

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GUESS WHO IS BACK AGAIN

Bangalore, again. Although this time it was again with masks and social distancing, there was something about the city that felt refreshing. Offline classes had resumed, and despite the oddity of attending lectures in person with half our faces covered, it felt... good.

As I settled into the routine of campus life, there was a part of me that couldn't shake the thought of Avantika. I missed her. Sure, I was enjoying the company of Pavni and my batchmates, but deep down, there was always that nagging inside me—Avantika's absence was palpable.

Then, just two days later, Tanishka arrived in Bangalore. We didn't talk much—there was always this unspoken distance between us. Most of our conversations revolved around studies, nothing personal. Without Avantika in the mix, we had run out of things to say. We'd sit together in class, exchange a few words about assignments, but that was it. No depth, no real connection

Meanwhile, things with Avantika had taken a strange turn. Since I came back to Bangalore, her messages had become shorter, and she wasn't talking to me as much. I assumed she was upset that I had decided to come back. Whenever we spoke, she would throw in remarks like, "Making more friends there, huh? Why would you even remember me?" I'd reassure her, but deep down, I could feel something was off.

Then, the same thing happened again at night—her call was busy. No reply, no explanation. I didn't ask and let it slide. This time too, I found out it was Mehul. He was going through a lot of academic pressure, and once again, she was there for him. I wasn't jealous... but it wasn't easy to digest either.

Days went by, and it became a pattern. Twice a week, she'd talk to Mehul for hours, leaving me with just a message saying, "Mehul is going through something."

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THE CONFESSION

A few weeks passed, and the constant late-night calls between Avantika and Mehul started to hurt. It wasn't that I was being orthodox or insecure, but talking to an ex regularly—that was something I just couldn't digest anymore. It felt like a line had been crossed, and I needed someone to talk to about it. The only person who truly knew both Avantika and I was Tanishka, and at this point, no one else felt like a better choice.

It was eating me up inside, and I couldn't keep it bottled anymore. Finally, one day, I confessed everything to Tanishka. The first thing she said was, "I told you to take more time, but you were too blinded by love to listen."

I sighed, knowing she was right. "What do I do now?" I asked, looking for some clarity.

"Nothing," she replied. "Just talk it out."

From that moment on, I started sharing everything with Tanishka. She became the one person I could be completely unfiltered with, telling her all about the ups and downs with Avantika. As the hybrid classes continued and the government announced that mandatory classes would resume from December, I had three months left before the real grind began again. During this phase, Tanishka and I grew closer, learning more about each other. But no matter how close we became; she never revealed any secrets about Avantika—just best friends' boundaries.

Tanishka became my safe space, the person I could turn to when everything felt too overwhelming.

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THE MIDNIGHT ANTICIPATION

It was October again—my birthday month—and yet, the one person I wanted to celebrate with wasn't there—Avantika. I missed her more than I could admit, but all I had was Tanishka to celebrate with. On my birthday night, I sat in my room, staring at my phone, waiting for Avantika to call. Maybe she'd surprise me with a cake, or maybe she'd show up. But as the hours ticked by, nothing happened. No calls, no texts. I was left in that awkward space, wondering if I should call her or keep waiting.

Then, at 11:34, there was a knock on my door. My heart skipped a beat—I thought maybe it was something Avantika had sent. But when I opened it, it was Tanishka, standing there with a cake box in one hand and a black plastic bag in the other.

"Are you going to make me stand out here, or can I come in?" she teased, grinning.

I tried to hide my disappointment as I was expecting someone else. "Of course, come in," I said, smiling as she walked in with the cake. I thanked her for being there.

By the time it hit midnight, my phone started ringing with calls and texts from everyone—except the one person I was waiting for. Her absence stung, and I tried to hide it, but Tanishka could tell.

"You don't seem happy," Tanishka said, reading me like a book. "What's wrong?"

I sighed. "I was waiting for Avantika's call... it's already past midnight."

Tanishka shrugged and smiled. "She's probably asleep, don't worry about it."

Then, she pulled two Budweiser cans from the black plastic bag and said, “Come on, let’s celebrate! It’s your birthday. Forget everything for now.”

We sat, drank, and talked for hours. At that moment, something shifted—I realized how much I relied on Tanishka. She wasn’t just a friend; she was becoming my best friend. We laughed, we reminisced, but in the back of my mind, I was still waiting for that call from Avantika.

Then, I noticed Tanishka’s phone buzzing. She glanced at the screen—it was Avantika calling. I raised my eyebrows, asking her to put it on speaker.

She hesitated but eventually did. The moment the call connected, we heard Avantika’s voice, sounding stressed, “Yaar, a major fuck-up happened. I was talking to Mehul and forgot to call Dev for his birthday.” My heart sank.

She quickly turned off the speaker and rushed outside. When she came back, she said, “Avantika was just talking to Mehul about some family issue. Relax, nothing major.”

I didn’t believe her. I looked at her and said quietly, “Tell me the truth... please

“Are they dating again?” I asked, my voice barely hiding the frustration. She shook her head, trying to calm me down. “Nah, chill out. Just finish your beer, we’ll talk about this tomorrow. She’s your girlfriend, right? You chose her.”

Before I could respond, my phone rang. It was Avantika. I hesitated but picked it up, putting it on speaker.

“Sorry, Dev... I don’t know how I fell asleep like that,” she said, her voice sweet but hurried. “Happy birthday, my love. I’m so sorry. I’ve sent you a gift, and it’ll be there tomorrow.”

Tanishka gave me a look, silently urging me not to mention what I’d overheard earlier.

“It’s okay,” I said, trying to mask the hurt. “Goodnight.”

As soon as I hung up, my eyes could not help—tears started welling up, and Tanishka noticed. She didn't say anything at first, just quietly wiped them away. I couldn't hold it in any longer.

"I love her, Tanishka... I still do. But why these lies? Why all this?"

Tanishka sighed, her hand resting on my shoulder. "Okay, listen... if I tell you something, you promise not to share it with Avantika, right?"

"Promise," I said, my voice steady despite the whirlwind inside me.

"She says they're just friends, but honestly, I don't know why she talks to Mehul so much. And Mehul... he's not over her. There could be something else too. He even came to meet her recently."

My heart sank further. "How do you know that?"

Tanishka hesitated. "I follow Mehul on Instagram. Here, look." She pulled out her phone and showed me a post—Mehul and Avantika, together. Mehul, with his awkward smile and those oversized glasses, stood next to Avantika, who looked as beautiful as ever.

"Who posts pictures with their ex like this?" I muttered, feeling a mix of anger and disbelief.

"Forget it. Trust Avantika," Tanishka said, trying to reassure me. "Finish your beer."

After a moment of silence, Tanishka broke the tension with an unexpected question. "You know, we were never really that close, right? But these past few months... Do you think we could be best friends?"

I looked at her, taken aback by the honesty in her question. "Yeah, Tanishka. I want us to be best friends. Thank you, for everything."

We stayed up the whole night, talking about everything—our first crushes, embarrassing moments, even the first people we'd kissed. There were no walls, no filters. We laughed, drank more beer, and shared stories we'd never told anyone else.

And then, something happened—something unspoken. It wasn't loud or obvious, but it was enough to shift the dynamic, adding something more to our trio. Tanishka made me promise not to mention it to anyone.

And, well, promises are meant to be kept.

It's 2024, and here I am, sitting with a half-empty glass. I was about to pour another peg, but the Old Monk was gone—just like that. I stared at the empty bottle, sighed, and glanced at the time—2:00 AM. How did it get so late again? The memories of 2021 crept back in like shadows that refuse to fade. It's funny how time can blur everything except the moments you wish you could forget.

The girl who had been my anchor through the storms, the one who shared countless late nights and whispered secrets with me, was now just a fragment of my past.

In the quiet of the night, as I sipped the last remnants of my drink, the weight of it all pressed down on me. The promises made, the unspoken moments, the way we thought we understood each other—these were the things that lingered. Time had moved on, but the beauty and sadness of those memories stayed, etched in the corners of my mind.

This time I set seven alarms, hoping to wake up on time. First alarm at 10:00 AM—snooze. 10:05—snooze again. By 10:10, I was awake enough to realize, “Oh crap, I’ve got a 10:30 class.” **Classic MBA move—living life dangerously between snooze buttons and deadlines.**

Feeling oddly refreshed (thanks, Old Monk—my body’s probably adjusted to it), I made my way to Prof. Ronit’s stats class. There he was, teaching T-tests... on pen and paper. In an MBA. I mean, who are we? Statisticians from the Stone Age?

On Excel, it’s three clicks. But here we were, burning through two full pages of calculations like cavemen discovering fire. I always wanted to raise my hand and ask Sir, which company in 2024 is going to say, ‘Forget automation—grab that notepad and manually solve this T-test?’ Because that’s a job I’d love to miss out on.

His voice droned on like a radio stuck between stations—just the kind of frequency that makes you question every life decision. I glanced around, and sure enough, about 50% of the class was either half-asleep or on the verge of it.

But honestly, I was pretty relaxed after seeing all the others. MBA now means *relative marking*. And in MBA language, that translates to “you’re not just competing against yourself—you’re competing against every other person in that room. So even if you scored a solid 90, but everyone else scored 100? Well, congratulations, you just failed.”

I thought an MBA was supposed to be about teamwork and growth, you know? Learning together, building synergy, all that corporate jazz. But nope! Here we were, a bunch of over-caffeinated gladiators in a statistical deathmatch, racing to see who could finish the T-test first. Because, obviously, McKinsey is looking for people who can win the fastest pen-and-paper T-test champions.

“Congratulations, you nailed that manual calculation! Now grab your notepad and welcome to the prestigious ‘Manual Math Division,’...Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the class ended. Sweet relief—until I remembered there were still two more subjects ahead, none of which ever made sense to me.

After surviving all those lectures, I couldn’t shake the thought: Was this B-school stuck in 2024 or had it time-travelled from the 1990s? Someone really needed to remind them that laptops and computers were not just a dream but actual tools used in this century.

I finally made my way back to my room. The silence of the hallway felt like a relief, a break from the constant noise of the day. As I reached for my keys and slid them into the lock, my fingers brushed against the key ring. That little key ring. The one Tanishka had gifted me.

I paused for a moment, staring at it—the charm dangling there, catching the faint light. It was small, barely noticeable to anyone else, but to me, it carried the weight of a thousand memories.

I knew I liked her—more than I was ever willing to admit—but does that mean our friendship had to suffer? Can two people not stay best friends just because one of them felt something more?

As I held that key ring in my hand, I couldn’t help but think about how things had unfolded between us. It was Tanishka who first felt something for me, but back then, I was with Avantika. I was too wrapped

up in that mess to even realize what was happening with Tanishka. She kept her feelings hidden, buried under the weight of our so-called friendship.

And when things finally started to change—when I realized I felt the same—she had already moved on with someone else. Timing has always been our worst enemy.

It made me wonder—did loving someone always mean risking the friendship? Or was it just bad luck that every time one of us was ready, the other was too late?

It was like a cruel joke—falling for each other, but never at the right time.

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THE UNSPOKEN MOMENTS

I won't forget my birthday of the year 2020. That was the year I found Avantika. But 2021? That's when I found something even more precious—my best friend, Tanishka.

Days blurred into weeks, and every day, Tanishka and I grew closer. The late-night chats, the endless banter—it all felt so natural, like it was meant to happen. The more we talked, the less I missed Avantika. It was strange how that void started to fill itself without me even realizing it.

We'd always argue about the weirdest things. I'd look at her and say, "How do you even watch anime? It's just cartoons!" And she'd fire back without hesitation, "And how do *you* watch Shahrukh Khan in every movie? Same overacting, same dramatic running with his arms wide open!"

I had to admit, she had a point. The whole arms-wide-open SRK signature move was kind of ridiculous when you thought about it. But it didn't stop me from defending him.

One thing I always admired about Tanishka was how unfiltered she was. She never sugar-coated anything, and that honesty was rare. She never lied—well, except for that one time. That one lie that changed everything.

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THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US

Avantika was in my life then, and though things felt shaky, I was holding on, hoping that maybe—just maybe—she wasn't lying. That Mehul was just her friend, nothing more. But by the time December rolled in, it wasn't just Avantika occupying my mind anymore. It was also Tanishka.

Yet, every time I brought up Avantika, Tanishka would either ignore it or change the subject. I couldn't tell if it was deliberate or just my imagination.

There was this particular day I remember when we were sitting in the library. The silence felt louder than usual, and I could sense something weighing on her mind. After a while, she just looked at me, eyes searching for something deeper.

"Basu," (she used to call me by this nickname. I still have no clue why, I mean, out of all the nicknames in the world, *Basu*?) she said quietly, "what's your priority list?"

I blinked, not expecting that question. "Huh?"

"In your life," she continued, "who comes first? Me, or Avantika?"

I froze. The air between us thickened with the weight of that question. I knew the answer, but saying it aloud felt like betraying Tanishka, even if it was the truth. "Tanishka... she's my girlfriend," I said slowly, almost apologetically. "So, yeah, she comes first."

The words hung in the air for a moment before she nodded. There was no argument, no outburst. Just a quiet nod, as if she had already known what I was going to say.

“In that case,” she whispered, “we can’t be Best friends anymore. Not like this.

I felt a pang of panic rise in my chest. “What? Tanishka, no, that’s not what I meant. You’re my best friend.”

“Basu, we can’t keep going like this.” Her voice broke the silence that had settled in the library. Tanishka sat across from me, her eyes fixed on the table, tracing patterns on the wood as if trying to distract herself from what she was about to say.

I blinked, unsure of where this conversation was going. “What do you mean?”

She looked up, and there was something in her gaze I hadn’t seen before—an unfamiliar distance. “I mean, with you and Avantika. I feel like... I’m always stuck in the middle and yaa January is coming and Avantika will be here”

I opened my mouth to argue, but felt short of words. The truth was, Tanishka had always been there for me, even when Avantika wasn’t. And yet, I kept her in the background, not realizing how much it hurt her.

She sighed, running her fingers through her hair, frustration etched on her face. “I can’t be your second choice, Basu”

“You’re not,” I said quickly, but my voice lacked conviction.

She shook her head. “You don’t get it. I asked you—what’s your priority list? And you didn’t even hesitate when you said it was Avantika.”

“And that’s the problem,” she said, standing up abruptly. “I can’t keep doing this. I can’t pretend like it, we are not on the same page”

“Tanishka, wait,” I stood too, reaching out as if I could physically stop her from leaving. “I don’t want to lose you.”

She paused, her hand gripping the back of her chair. “You already have, Dev.”

The words sliced through me, and before I could say anything, she walked out of the library, leaving me surrounded by rows of silent books. The air felt heavier, the space suddenly too small, too suffocating.

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THE QUIET DRIFT

After that conversation in the library, all my time in Bangalore became hazy. I couldn't escape the feeling that something was slipping through my fingers—no, someone, actually. Someone who had meant more to me than I was willing to admit, even to myself. Every time I tried to patch things up, the rift between us grew wider.

Nights were the worst. Alone in the quiet, my mind would spin in circles. I'd think about Tanishka—about everything we used to share—and wonder where it all went wrong. The conversations, the laughter, the comfort... all of it seemed like a distant memory now. I'd lie awake for hours, replaying every word, every moment, hoping to find a way to fix it. But no matter how many times I went over it, the answers never came.

And then, after spending hours thinking about Tanishka, I'd do something that only made things worse—I'd text Avantika.

It was a habit I couldn't seem to break. "I'm still talking to Avantika," I'd tell myself, as if that would somehow make me feel better. As if it would make the emptiness go away. But deep down, I was aware that this wasn't the solution—it was just another distraction. Another fragile connection I was trying to keep intact, even though it felt like both were crumbling.

I was losing both of them, and I was too stubborn to admit it. I thought I could balance it all—my friendship with Tanishka, whatever was left of it, and whatever it was I had with Avantika. But the truth was that I was losing them both.



WHEN WE WERE US

I kept trying.

Every day, I found myself reaching out, asking her to talk, to just explain what had gone wrong. “We’ll sort it out,” I would say. “We can fix this. Just tell me what happened.”

But every time, she’d give me the same answer. A smile that didn’t reach her eyes and a half-hearted “It’s fine.” I could feel her slipping further away, but I wasn’t ready to give up. Not yet. I told myself that if I tried hard enough, if I kept pushing, we’d find our way back.

So, I kept at it. Day after day, I’d ask her to meet, to talk. I tried everything — random messages, sending her songs that once made us laugh. But nothing worked. The more I tried, the more distant she became. It was like chasing a shadow.

Finally, after what felt like a hundred failed attempts, we had a real conversation. It wasn’t the heartfelt talk I had imagined, but it was something else. We were sitting in the canteen one afternoon, and I managed to catch her alone.

“Can we please talk?” I asked, almost pleading this time. “Tell me what’s wrong. We can figure it out. We always do.”

She sighed, pushing her plate aside and looking at me with tired eyes. For a moment, it felt like she was going to shrug me off again, like she had so many times before. But this time, something was different. She didn’t look away.

“Fine,” she said, her voice quieter than usual. “We’ll talk. But it’s not going to change anything.”

“There’s a difference between best friends and just friends. Best friends stay, no matter what. But regular friends... They drift. And sometimes, no matter how hard you try, you can’t bring them back.”

Her words stung, but at least it was a start. I leaned in, desperate for any sliver of hope that we could fix this. “Why does it feel like we’re drifting apart?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

She looked down at the table, her fingers tracing the edges of her plate, “Because we are,” she finally said. “I don’t know when it happened, but we’re just... not the same anymore.”

I felt a lump in my throat. “But we can fix it. We always figure things out. We’ve been through so much together.”

She shook her head slowly, her eyes meeting mine with a sadness that was almost unbearable.

“Not this time. We’re not on the same page anymore. We haven’t been for a long time.”

I didn’t know what to say. For so long, I had been trying to convince myself that things would get better, that if I just kept pushing, we’d go back to how we used to be. But hearing her say it out loud... it broke something inside me.

I nodded, though every part of me wanted to argue, to fight. “So that’s it then?” I asked, my voice shaking. “We’re just... friends now?”

“Just friends,” she said softly. “Like you and Pavni.”

And just like that, the final thread between us snapped.

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THE MOMENT IT ALL BROKE

Tanishka and I still talked, but things were different now. She never made the first move. I was the one calling her, texting her, asking if we could meet or sit together in class. It was always me. She barely picked up the phone anymore, and when she did, it felt like she was doing it out of obligation, like she was talking to someone else—someone more important. We still spoke, but it was rare, almost robotic. By January, the distance between us had grown, and yet, I tried to ignore it.

January was a strange month. Avantika was coming back soon. I should've been excited. I should've felt something. But deep down, I knew things weren't the same. Sure, we were still dating, but there was this unsettling feeling I couldn't shake. We said "I love you," but it was hollow, like we were forcing ourselves to believe in something that wasn't there anymore.

Then came January 7th—**Tanishka's birthday**. I wanted to make things right, but there was this invisible wall between us.

Just two days later was when Avantika was landing in Bangalore, and I was caught in this mess between what was and what should have been.

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THE UNFAIR COURT OF FRIENDSHIP

January 7th. I was ready—*really ready*—to make her birthday unforgettable. I had planned everything, down to the smallest detail. I was going to surprise her at 11:30 with a cake, just like she had surprised me once.

I reached her PG, my heart racing a bit as I knocked on her door. She opened it, and there she was, sitting in her usual spot. I sat down next to her, a smile already forming on my face, ready for the moment.

But something was off.

She looked at me like there was something she needed to say, “Basu, I need to tell you something.”

I smiled, trying to act casual, even though I felt a knot tightening in my stomach. “Yeah, sure, tell me”. Tanishka

“I’m in a relationship,” she said.

Her words hit harder than I could’ve ever imagined.

I wasn’t prepared for the jealousy that followed. It crawled inside me, unexpected and raw. She was just my friend. **My best friend.** And yet, I felt this unbearable sting, like I was losing something I didn’t even realize I had.

“Who?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

“He’s coming to meet me now. You’ll meet him too.”

Meet him? My heart sank. I didn’t want to meet him. I didn’t want to see the person who had taken her away. But how could I say no? I never could when it came to her.

I tried to act normal, as if it didn't bother me, but inside I was a mess. "Why?" The word slipped out, and it wasn't even a question, more like a desperate plea. But what right did I have to ask? I was with Avantika, wasn't I? I was in a relationship too, yet here I was, feeling like I was losing something much more important than I had ever realized.

At that moment, it hit me. **A female best friend can either have a boyfriend or a best friend—but not both.**

This should seriously be a law! Like, a legitimate court order.

I felt like the sidekick in my own story, suddenly sidelined because someone else had entered the picture.

Before I could say anything more, there was a knock on the door. She got up to open it, and walked in on this guy. A 6'1" gym freak, with muscles bulging out of a crumpled t-shirt that looked like it hadn't seen an iron in months. And those jeans? They were barely hanging on. Honestly, his whole vibe screamed, *'I don't care about basic hygiene, but I can bench press a car.'* The worst dressing sense I had ever seen. If I didn't know better, I would've thought he was a bouncer at some shady bar.

"Hi, bro. I'm Mihir," he said, his thick Jaat accent rolling off his tongue like a punch to my pride.

I forced a smile, my face struggling to keep up with the fake politeness. Inside, though, I was a mess. Every word he spoke felt like a reminder of everything I was losing. It was like someone had flipped a switch, and now I was the outsider in a space where I once belonged.

We cut the cake together. The first bite—**she was confused**—but she gave it to me. **Haan, that was a sign.** Maybe it felt like a sign—like maybe, just maybe, I still mattered.

Meanwhile, Mihir stood there, staring at us like he was missing the point. I couldn't help but think, **why the hell is he even here?** His whole presence felt like an intrusion, a reminder that things had changed.

The small talk that followed only made things worse.

At one point **"mann kar raha tha ki jaake uska muh noch lu"** My hands were shaking, my thoughts spiralling into a chaotic mess of jealousy

and anger.

And then, after what felt like hours of forced smiles and fake laughter, I couldn't hold it in anymore.

I turned to him, trying my best to sound polite, "Mihir, can you please come back later? I need to talk to Tanishka."

He gave me a look like I had just insulted his entire family. Then, glancing at Tanishka, he said in his thick accent, "It's her birthday, bro. I think I should be with her."

I forced a smile, but inside I was losing it. "Bhai, tu abhi abhi aaya hai. Just leave for a bit."

I knew what I was doing wasn't exactly right. I mean, I'd lose it if Avantika's best friend tried to pull this with me, but I didn't care. I needed to talk to her, and I couldn't wait anymore.

Mihir looked back at Tanishka, probably expecting her to throw me out or something, but she sighed and said, "Fifteen minutes, Mihir. Please."

He hesitated for a moment, his brow furrowing like he was trying to figure out if he should punch me or not. But finally, he nodded and left the room, muttering something under his breath that I didn't catch.

As soon as Mihir left the room,

Kya majboori thi tujhe isko boyfriend banane ki?" The words came out almost instantly with frustration and jealousy laced in every syllable.

Tanishka turned to me; her expression unreadable. "I didn't want to get caught in your mess with Avantika," she said, her voice calm but firm. "You never treated me like I mattered when she was around, Basu. Even when you were with Avantika, you barely talked to me. You know that, right? And she is coming the day after tomorrow and mujhe phir se wahi experience nhi krna tha.

Her words hit me like a punch in the gut. And the worst part? She was right. All this time, I had sidelined her, unknowingly pushing her aside for someone else. Now, I was paying the price for it.

"I don't want to see you with him, chor de isko abhi please" I blurted out, the jealousy and frustration boiling over, spilling out before I could

stop myself.

She didn't even flinch. Her eyes were calm, but her words were a dagger. "I gave you the choice, Basu. Me or Avantika. You made your decision."

And there it was—the cold, harsh truth I had been avoiding all this time. I had made my choice. And in doing so, I had lost her.

She took a deep breath, her voice softening just a little. "I'm sorry," she said, and this time, it wasn't an apology for anything she had done. It was for what I had done.

Her voice trembled slightly, and I could see the pain behind her eyes. "I've already suffered too much, Basu. Mihir and I started dating yesterday. I can't go through this again, not knowing that you might just sideline me when Avantika comes back. I can't bear the thought of being pushed away again."

Every word felt like a dagger twisting deeper into my heart. The jealousy I had felt earlier morphed into a new kind of ache—one that came from the realization that I had taken her for granted. I had been so wrapped up in my own confusion and feelings for Avantika that I hadn't considered what I was losing in the process.

"I don't want to see you hurt," she continued, her voice steady despite the turmoil in her eyes. "I can't keep waiting around for you to make a choice that's already been made. It hurts too much to be a second choice"

Her words cut deeper than I thought was possible. I sat there, speechless, watching her, my heart shattering into pieces I knew I'd never be able to put back together.

Tanishka looked away, and for a moment, the silence between us felt louder than anything else.

Fifteen minutes later, Mihir walked back in. For him, it seemed those fifteen minutes were plenty. I've always had a problem with people whose names start with "M"—Mehul, Mihir, Manavit. It's like there's a universal rule for them to annoy me.

Mihir walked in and stared at me like I had stolen his protein powder. “Ho gaya?” he asked in his thick Jaat accent, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

Tanishka nodded, “Haan.”

And just like that, the air in the room froze. There was no conversation, nothing. We sat there quietly, as if waiting for something to happen. Mihir sat there like he was waiting for me to leave, and I was silently wondering when he would finally go. Tanishka, on the other hand, seemed like she regretted having us both meet in the first place.

I thought, *maybe it's better if I go*. “But I didn’t want to leave, and when I finally stood up, ready to walk out, Tanishka spoke up, “Where are you going?”

That question—it was a relief. At least she still wanted me there, for whatever little that was worth.

But Mihir? He didn’t say anything, but I could feel his jealousy burning holes into the back of my head. His eyes screamed, *why does this guy get to stay?*

A thought crossed my mind: “Male best friends are practically designed to make boyfriends jealous.”. And that day, I believed it more than ever.

Before I could process it further, Mihir finally broke the silence. “Milte hain kal,” he muttered through gritted teeth, barely able to conceal his irritation. And with that, he stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

The second the door closed behind him, something shifted. The air that had been thick with tension became soft, fragile. Tanishka and I looked at each other, and for the first time in months, it felt like we could actually talk.

And we did. We talked about everything. Every hidden feeling, every misunderstanding, every hurt. We cried together—long, painful tears that seemed to wash away all the unsaid words between us. It was like we were trying to heal wounds that were too deep.

And she promised me not to share with anyone and – promises are meant to be kept.

Then came the hardest part. Tanishka looked at me, her eyes wet with tears, and said, “Basu, this is our last meeting. Hum ab se nahi mil rahe hain.”

The words shattered me. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. And just as if fate had a cruel sense of humor, her phone buzzed with a series of notifications. Mihir’s name flashed across the screen repeatedly. His messages were pouring in like a flood, one after the other.

And all those messages were for me “kitna c***ya hai tera best friend.....”

I couldn’t help myself. I looked at her and said, “Tu usko chhod de. He doesn’t deserve you, Tanishka. He’s a lousy, insecure guy.

I know,” she said quietly.

Tanishka stayed quiet, her eyes focused on the messages, but she didn’t respond. We both ignored the buzzing phone, pretending that it wasn’t there.

I tried to salvage the situation. “I’ll talk to Avantika this time. I swear, things will be different.”

She just gave me a sad smile. “Two boats? You’re going to put your feet in two boats, Basu?”

And there it was—the truth I didn’t want to admit, staring me in the face. She was right. I was trying to have it all, and in doing so, I was losing everything.

“Please leave,” she said softly, but firmly. “Forget everything. Let’s be strangers. Avantika’s coming the day after tomorrow. You’ll have her, and that’s all you need, right? I can’t do this anymore.”

I hesitated, searching her face for any sign of hope, but it was gone. Just before I walked out, she added, “Basu, love in moderation, okay? Don’t indulge too much, or you’ll stop seeing other people—your friends. Because for one, you’ll lose everyone.”

I knew it was over. I had lost her that day—not in the way you lose someone to death, but in a way that leaves a void inside you that never quite feels whole again, no matter how hard you try.

I walked out, the weight of everything settling in. I had lost my best friend, and with her, I lost a part of myself.

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THE PRETENCE

The next day, Tanishka and I didn't interact. It was like we had both agreed to pretend that our world hadn't shifted on its axis. Avantika arrived, and it felt surreal. We all met like nothing had happened, as if the previous day's emotional turmoil had been a figment of our imaginations.

Tanishka seemed to have moved on, her smiles brighter as she talked to Mihir. I watched from a distance, a pang of jealousy gnawing at my insides. I lost her because of my own choices, and now she looked happier than ever. It twisted something inside me, the thought that I never made her feel valued enough.

I turned my focus to Avantika, determined to give my 100% to our relationship **"If can't be a good best friend, I can at least be the best boyfriend"**. I wanted to create a space where nothing could go wrong, where no one would feel hurt. We spent time together, and for the most part, everything seemed perfect. We laughed, shared secrets, and for a while, I almost believed that Tanishka was just a fading memory.

Yet, as the days turned into weeks, I couldn't shake the feeling of loss. I missed Tanishka's laughter, her insights, and the way we could talk for hours. It was different with Avantika; she was fun, but I couldn't help but feel like I was putting a bandage over a wound that needed more than just temporary relief.

One afternoon, while we sat together, I finally voiced what had been on my mind. "Avantika, can we make it public that we're dating?"

She looked at me, her expression shifting. "I don't think it's the right time yet, Dev."

I felt a familiar disappointment wash over me. “Why not? It feels awkward being just friends in front of everyone, especially when we’re not just friends.”

She shrugged, avoiding my gaze. “I just don’t want to rush things. We’ll get there, I promise.”

The conversation hung in the air, awkward silence stretching between us. I smiled, but inside, I felt a mix of confusion and frustration. Everything about my life felt complicated, tangled in the web of feelings I hadn’t fully addressed.

As much as I tried to focus on us, I couldn’t shake the thought that Tanishka was happy with Mihir, and that was the hardest pill to swallow.

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MY BREAKING POINT

I was trying to give my all to the relationship with Avantika. But as the saying goes, when you give someone your all, they start taking you for granted. Everything seemed okay on the surface.

I still remember the day: March 16th. Avantika shared a PG with Tanishka, and I wasn't exactly keen on visiting all the time. One afternoon, Avantika told me she was on her period and asked if we could skip our usual meet-up. "I'm really tired today, Dev. Can we please meet another time?"

I nodded, trying to mask my disappointment. "It's fine. You rest. We can catch up later."

After leaving, I decided to play badminton to clear my mind. As I walked, I called her to check if she needed anything, but there was no answer. I bought her favorite cheese burst pizza, hoping to surprise her.

An hour passed with no response. My concern grew, and I decided to check on her. I knocked on the door, but no one answered. I heard footsteps inside, but the silence stretched on. Fifteen minutes later, Tanishka finally opened the door, looking confused and slightly disheveled. As she spoke, I could smell the faint scent of alcohol on her breath.

"What's wrong?" she asked, a hint of irritation in her tone.

"I wanted to see Avantika," I replied, my frustration bubbling. "But she won't let me in."

I could see Mihir in the background, and the sight stung. I had no right to question him or what was happening behind that closed door. "Just let

me see her,” I insisted, but Tanishka shook her head.

“She’s sleeping. You can’t go in.

Then, out of nowhere, Avantika appeared in a black crop top, her lips painted in bold red lipstick and there was a spark in her eyes that suggested she hadn’t been sleeping at all. My heart raced. “What happened? Are you okay?” I asked.

“In an angry mode,” she snapped. “I told you; I’m not seeing anyone today. Why are you here?”

Something shifted in her eyes, a defensive stance I had never seen before. She was looking past me, and I knew—someone else was there. I felt rage boil inside me, especially when Mihir said, “Chal bhai, let’s go. Leave them alone.”

“Stay out of this, Mihir. It’s my personal matter,” I shot back, my voice rising. I turned back to Avantika. “Can I come in?”

She pulled my shirt, desperation in her voice. “No need. Just go.”

But I couldn’t leave. My mind wouldn’t let me. I pushed past her into the apartment, her grip on my shirt loosening. The sight that met my eyes was a punch to the gut. Two pizza boxes and a bottle of vodka sat on the table, accompanied by four chairs, which meant there was one more person in the room.

I rushed to the room where I saw the footsteps, my heart pounding. And there he was—**Mehul, one of the ugliest people I had ever seen.** It seemed Avantika had asked him to hide away, and the sight of him made my blood boil. Everything shattered in that moment. My mind went blank.

I stumbled back into the hall, fury and heartbreak colliding. I kicked the table with all my strength, sending the pizza and vodka crashing to the floor. The sound echoed like a thunderclap, and I felt a surge of adrenaline mixed with despair as the glass shattered. I could almost hear the laughter of betrayal in that broken silence.

I grabbed Avantika’s hand, pulling her into the other room, slamming the door shut behind us. Tears streamed down my face; I was crying, while

she remained composed.

“Why, Avantika?” I asked, my voice cracking. “What forced you to do this? You could have told me!”

I noticed she wasn’t crying. “I didn’t want to hurt you. I thought it would be easier this way.”

“Easier?” I echoed, incredulous. “You think this is easier? Do you even understand what you’ve done?”

I heard Tanishka, Mehul, and Mihir pounding on the door, pleading, “Bhai, khol!”

“Why?” I yelled back, my voice raw with pain. “Why would you do this to me?”

Avantika stood there, her expression a mix of guilt and fear. “I thought you’d be angry, that’s why I didn’t tell you. I didn’t want you to react like this and now please for god sake just go aaj se sb khatam”

As she spoke, the weight of her words hit me like a freight train. My heart was in pieces, and I felt the ground beneath me fall away. “And what about this?” I gestured wildly, my breath ragged. “What is this? You’re not the person I thought you were!”

I looked into her eyes, and for a brief moment, I saw a flicker of the girl I had fallen for. But it was overshadowed by the pain and betrayal.

She opened the door, and as I turned to leave, I noticed the watch she had given me still on my wrist. In a moment of sheer frustration, I took it off and threw it at her, watching as it clattered to the floor.

“I don’t want this,” I shouted, my voice echoing in the silence that followed.

“Dev, wait!” she called out, but I was already stepping away.

Are you my boyfriend or what?” she said, her voice trembling in front of everyone. “We’re not dating, and you can’t prove that we ever were.” I could see the confusion in their eyes, deepening the ache in my chest. She was trying to make it clear that she wasn’t the one in the wrong, that she hadn’t cheated on me. I noticed Tanishka standing there, looking hesitant, as if she wanted to speak up but Mihir was subtly holding her back.

Mehul smirked, stepping forward. “Dev, this behaviour is unacceptable. Who gave you the right? You think you can just storm in here?”

“Her mother won’t tolerate this,” he continued dismissively. “You think you can act like this and have no consequences?”

Maa ch***a, be*****od,” I snapped, my anger boiling over. I couldn’t believe the audacity of his words. And with that, I turned on my heel and left the PG, the weight of everything crashing down on me.

As I stepped out, my mind raced with the weight of my losses. Everyone thought I was in the wrong, that I had messed up.

I had lost everything—my best friend and my love. As I walked away, I glanced back at H3 304, the room where I had lost it all. It felt like I was leaving behind a part of myself, and the world was closing in around me.

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THE DAY OF REVELATION

That was the day I finally understood why people drink, why they smoke, why they do anything to numb the pain. The ache inside was too much to bear. I needed an escape, a distraction—anything to keep my mind from spiralling deeper into the mess I was in.

I ended up at Pavni's place. When she opened the door, I saw a girl sitting on the couch with her. I was in no mood for introductions or small talk. In my head, I was like, *Who the fuck is this?* But I didn't care enough to ask. I needed to talk to Pavni, and this random girl wasn't about to stop me.

"Pavni, I need to talk. Now."

Her eyes widened, catching the seriousness in my voice. She stood up, excused herself from her guest, and led me to the balcony. We weren't exactly best friends back then, but she was the only person I could talk to at that moment, someone who might help me make sense of this madness. And now? Now she's my bread and butter, the one constant in all this chaos.

But that night, I didn't spill everything. I couldn't. The whole *Tanishka* thing was too raw, too complicated. So, I stuck to Avantika. I let it all out, how she'd made me feel like a fool, how she turned everything on me in front of everyone, acting like we had never been together. Pavni listened quietly, her face growing more shocked with every word.

"You've been dealing with this on your own?" Pavni asked, disbelief and a hint of anger creeping into her voice. "Why the hell didn't you say something sooner?"

I shrugged, trying to keep it together. The truth? I wasn't ready. I didn't know how to put it into words, how to explain the mess that had become my life. How do you even start? It wasn't just some break-up story; it was this tangled web of betrayal, confusion, and losing parts of myself along the way.

"I don't know, Pavni," I muttered, my eyes fixed on the distant city lights, avoiding her gaze. "I guess... I didn't want to make it real. Talking about it makes it real, you know?"

Pavni leaned back, crossing her arms, her eyes narrowing as she thought. "Dev, ek baat bata... Avantika and Mehul—do you think they were; you know... hooking up? Or were they just... there?"

I sighed, the thought had crossed my mind a thousand times, but hearing it out loud felt like a punch to the gut. "They must be. Why else would she hide all this from me?"

Pavni raised an eyebrow. "Exactly. If it was nothing, she wouldn't have done all this."

As Pavni and I sat there, talking in low voices, the door to the balcony creaked open. I glanced up, barely registering her presence at first—it was Palak, the uninvited guest I hadn't even noticed until now, she was our classmate.

Her lips held a cigarette, dangling in a way that reminded me of Avantika. For a moment, I just stared, the déjà vu of it all hitting me like a wave.

"Everything okay, guys?" Palak asked, her voice cutting through the silence. "Kya hua hai, Dev? You look a little... off."

Pavni was quick to respond, probably a little too quickly. "Nothing, Palak. Just some college-related stuff. Sorting it out."

But Palak wasn't dumb. She looked at both of us, her eyes narrowing, like she knew something more was going on. Still, she didn't push it. She just took another drag from her cigarette, exhaling slowly.

I couldn't help but ask, "Kya milta hai cigarette peeke? What's the point?"

She blew out a stream of smoke and shrugged. “Acha lagta hai bs. Relaxing.”

For a second, I just stared at her, then I reached out, my hand open. “Pass it.”

I took two, maybe three drags of the cigarette. The smoke hit my lungs, and for a brief moment, everything felt... lighter. My mind, which had been racing nonstop, started to slow down. It was strange—how something so small could calm the chaos.

Palak, leaning against the railing, flicked her cigarette. “Bhai, peg khatam nahi karna?” she asked Pavni, her tone casual but knowing.

Pavni turned to me. “Tu piyega kya, Dev?”

Without hesitation, I nodded. “Yes.”

And that was it. One peg turned into five or six. With each drink, the tension between us melted away. The more we drank, the closer we got. Alcohol has this way of turning strangers into friends—by the fourth peg, it felt like we had known each other for years.

Somewhere between the fourth and fifth, I started talking. Really talking. I shared everything—Avantika, Mehul, the whole mess. I spilled it all to Palak, and for once, it didn’t feel like a burden.

But Tanishka... **She was like the last piece of chocolate, too precious to share.** Secrets, our promises. No matter how intoxicated I was, I couldn’t bring myself to talk about her. Some things stayed locked away, untouched by even alcohol or conversation.

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BEING SIDELINED

I wasn't really enjoying the company of Palak and Pavni anymore. I tried to laugh, tried to be present, but it felt hollow—like something was missing. Maybe it was Tanishka, or maybe Avantika. Hell, I wasn't even sure anymore.

Whenever I saw Tanishka and Mihir, it was like they were ripped out of some romantic drama—happy, glowing, perfect. I felt a pang of jealousy hit me hard. There they were, looking disgustingly happy, while there I was, feeling like the forgotten page in a book she'd already finished reading.

And then there was Avantika. I couldn't escape her either. We were in the same class, and every time I saw her, she was glued to her phone, always texting that bastard. It was like I didn't exist anymore, just a ghost watching from the sidelines.

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LATE-NIGHT CALLS

I was just trying to move on, trying to make sense of everything. Most nights were spent overthinking, staring at the ceiling, wondering how it all went wrong. It was one of those late nights when My phone buzzed. I looked at the screen—*Tanishka calling*. Without a second thought, I picked up.

“Hi,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

“I really can’t talk much,” she replied, her voice sounding distant, almost hesitant. “But... tu thik hai?”

I paused for a second, searching for words. “Yeah... I mean, yeah, trying to make sense of it all.”

She sighed. “Maine teko warn kra tha... it was too early.”

I couldn’t argue with her. She had warned me, but at that moment, it didn’t make it hurt any less.

“But thik hai,” she continued softly, “Jo bhi hua, forget everything. Move on. Meet someone new.”

I couldn’t help myself. “You moved on, right? Happy with Mihir?”

There was a pause on the other end, and then she replied, her voice sharper than before. “Much happier. At least I have someone who knows not to make me feel sidelined.”

“Haan?” I muttered, feeling a sting in my chest. “Then... why this call?”

She hesitated, her tone softening. “You were my friend once... and I just wanted to know if you were okay.”

I took a deep breath, forcing a smile she couldn’t see. “Okay.”

After the call ended, I sat there, staring at the phone. Tanishka's words played on a loop: "*You were my friend once.*"

Were. Past tense. It hit harder than I expected.

I stood by the window, watching the city lights. **Everyone else had moved on, but I was still here—stuck between memories and what could've been, trapped in the silence where the past refuses to fade.**"

I reached for the pack of cigarettes on the table—Palak's influence, I guess. I didn't even like smoking, but that night, it seemed like the right thing to do. I lit one and inhaled deeply, the smoke filling my lungs, and for a moment, the ache in my chest dulled.

I wanted to call someone. Pavni, maybe. Or even Palak. But it didn't feel right. They weren't part of this story. Not the real one, the one buried deep beneath all the casual conversations and late-night drinking sessions. The one I couldn't share with anyone.

I thought to myself Tanishka was right. I needed to move on. I needed to let go of whatever I was holding on to, but how? How do you just erase memories, of shared moments of everything that once mattered so much?

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SEARCHING FOR CLOSURE

Days passed, but I felt stuck, trapped in the same loop. Every time I walked into the classroom, there she was—Avantika, always on her phone, laughing and chatting away. I was sure it was Mehul on the other end, and that thought twisted like a knife in my chest. No matter how hard I tried to focus on anything else, I couldn't escape her presence. It felt like a constant reminder of what I had lost and what she had chosen instead. I needed answers, and I needed them quickly.

I couldn't keep living like this. I needed closure—proper closure. If I was ever going to move on, I needed answers. Why did she cheat? What went wrong? Was it me? Did I do something?

I opened WhatsApp, scrolling through my contacts until I found her name. Her chat wasn't at the top anymore; it felt like ages since we'd spoken. But I took a deep breath and typed out a message: "Can we meet once?"

Seconds felt like hours as I waited for her reply. "For what?" she asked.

Ek baar... or you want to make this a scene like you did at my PG?" she again messaged

"Just wanna meet. No drama," I sent back.

After a moment, she responded, "Last time?"

"Yeah," I replied. "My place?"

"Fine," she said.

Fifteen minutes later, she arrived. Avantika walked in, and as she sat on the bed, I settled into the chair across from her. It felt strange—last

time, we'd lounged together, everything so intimate and comfortable. Now, we were miles apart, both physically and emotionally.

"Why did you call me here, Dev?" Avantika broke the silence, her voice tense.

I took a breath. "Just tell me why, Avantika. Why did you cheat?"

"Do you think I cheated?" she shot back, defensively.

"Then why were you hiding Mehul?" I pressed, trying to keep my cool.

She looked away, frustration evident. "I knew you would react. That was the main reason I didn't want to tell you. And I promised Tanishka, I wouldn't mention it."

"Why didn't you accept that we were dating in front of everyone?" I asked, my heart racing.

"Because Mehul was there!" she exclaimed, her eyes finally meeting mine. "If he saw us together, he'd tell my mom, and I didn't want to create any mess. You know how she is. He came to say goodbye since he's going back to college, so we were partying"

I felt a surge of anger mixed with confusion. "So, you chose to hide everything instead?"

She shifted uncomfortably. "You always seemed off with Mehul. And for me, I can't just leave him. He's my ex, but we've known each other since class 3, I can't break my friendship with him," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

My mind was struggling to digest this. "But what should I do with all of this? Am I just supposed to accept it?"

I looked at her, my mind racing. "Are you telling the truth? Swear on me."

She held my gaze, calm and composed. "Yes, Dev. I'm not lying. Don't you trust me?"

I stared at her, trying to find the truth in her words, but everything felt so tangled.

I sat there, torn. Should I believe her? Could I trust her words after everything that had happened?

Then why were you always talking to Mehul in class? Every time I looked, it was like you were glued to your phone, chatting with him.”

She sighed, almost annoyed now. “I wasn’t always talking to Mehul. I was talking to Sneha. I was sharing everything with her. Yeah, sometimes I talk to Mehul too, but not always. It’s not what you think.”

The room fell into an awkward silence, heavy with the weight of unresolved feelings. My heart was torn between wanting to believe her and the anger that still lingered. I couldn’t shake the doubts.

Before I could respond, she leaned in suddenly and kissed me. It caught me off guard, and for a second, everything else disappeared. The confusion, the hurt, the questions—it all melted away in that moment.

If I think about it now, girls always have that card to play—something they can use to erase their mistakes. It’s like a secret weapon they can pull out when things get messy, and guys often just fall for it, forgetting everything else in an instant.

After that moment, I looked at her and said, “Please, aage se kuch mat chupana.” I needed honesty—no more secrets.

If I look back now, I realized I was also cheating—emotionally, at least, Avantika had no clue about Tanishka, that we were best friends at one point, or why I suddenly stopped talking to her.

* * * * *

LOST IN ILLUSIONS

Days passed, and things gradually started healing between Avantika and me. We were together, but a part of me still couldn't fully accept it. But maybe that's what love does to people—it makes you do things you never thought you would.

Sab sahi lag raha tha, like everything was falling into place, but I knew deep down I was living in some kind of illusion. We were together, and as time went on, I found myself forgetting about Tanishka—at least trying to.

People often use something to heal their pain; maybe I was using Avantika to forget Tanishka. One distraction to replace another.

I was always feeling insecure with Avantika, especially when she talked to Mehul. It was like this constant knot in my stomach that wouldn't go away. Even though we were together, the shadow of him always lingered, making me question everything.

When I shared all this with Palak and Pavni, they didn't hold back.

“Dev, pyar mein log andhe hote hain, aur tu c****ya ho gaya hai,” Palak said, shaking her head.

Pavni chimed in, laughing, “Sahi bol rahi hai yeh. Tumhe khud bhi nahi pata kya chal raha hai.”

* * * * *

THE SUMMER INTERNSHIP

The final year of college brought with it the much-anticipated summer internships—a chance to step out of the classroom and into the real world. It was a defining phase, where every student had to leave the comfort of campus and prove themselves at an actual company.

Everyone received internships in different cities, scattered across the country. Avantika and I, too, were placed in separate locations. She got Rajasthan, which just so happened to be where Mehul lived. But I couldn't say anything, right? I wanted to ask her if she had chosen it for that reason, but instead, I stayed silent.

While everyone was excitedly discussing their internship offers, my mind drifted to Tanishka. I wondered how she was doing, where she had been placed. I wanted to ask, but it never seemed like the right time. We barely spoke anymore. Conversations had become limited to brief exchanges about college work, and even those felt awkward, like there was something in the air that neither of us wanted to address.

Amid the buzz of excitement surrounding our internship placements, I caught a glimpse of Tanishka standing alone in the corner. Her usual spark was missing; she seemed distant and withdrawn, like something heavy was weighing her down. It was clear she wasn't as happy as before.

I wanted to ask if everything was okay, but I hesitated. It felt easier to avoid the awkwardness that had grown between us. As the days passed and the internship break approached, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong.

Finally, just before we left for our internships, I saw her sitting alone in the campus courtyard scrolling through her phone. This was my chance.

“Is everything fine?” I asked, trying to sound casual, hoping she’d open up.

She replied with a simple, “Yes.” Her tone was vague, and it was clear she wasn’t interested in building any more conversation. I guess she didn’t want to share, or maybe I wasn’t the person she wanted to talk to anymore.

As silence hung between us, I turned away, realizing the distance between us had only grown. I couldn’t help but wonder—was it too late to fix this, or had we both moved too far apart to ever go back?

And I chose to just exit quietly.

* * * * *

SUMMER BREAK

As the summer break began, we both left for our respective internships. Avantika and I talked regularly, but our conversations were more routine—about work, daily life, and how we were managing. Everything felt smooth between us, almost too smooth. It was as if the complications of the past were fading away, and I found myself gradually forgetting about Tanishka.

One night, when I was on a call with Avantika, my phone suddenly vibrated. I glanced down and saw Tanishka's name flash on the screen. Without thinking, I quickly told Avantika, "Papa ka call aa raha hai," even though I knew that wasn't true. I wasn't sure why I felt the need to hide it from her, but I did.

I called Tanishka back, and she answered, "Agar tu busy hai, toh baad mein call karti hu." I felt a rush of happiness just to hear her voice. "Nahi, bta! Kya haal hai? Kaisi hai tu?" I asked eagerly.

"Sab theek hai," she replied, but her tone was neutral.

We started catching up, asking each other about our lives, how everything was going, and where she was interning. It felt so good to reconnect, and I found myself wishing it could last longer.

Finally, I asked, "Aaj achanak aise kyun call kiya?"

"Bas aise hi," she replied.

After some small talk, we ended the call. As soon as I hung up, I couldn't shake the feeling that she might have been missing our friendship too. There was a sense that she wanted to tell me something important, but I didn't want to pry. The thought lingered in my mind, making me wonder what she hadn't shared.

So, I texted her, “Is everything fine? Sab thik hai na?”

She replied with a simple, “Yes.”

“Kal baat karte hain. Good night!” I typed back, hoping for more but accepting the silence.

The next day dragged on, each hour stretching longer than the last as I sat in the office, staring at the Excel sheet. Numbers danced around like they were mocking me. Why was I even interning here? I was never good at math!

Finally, as night settled in, I gathered my courage and dialed Tanishka’s number.

After a brief conversation, I asked, “Is there something on your mind? I know we’re not as close as we used to be, but if you want to share, I’m here.”

She paused before opening up. “It’s just... Mihir has changed completely. He treats me like an object, like I’m just there for him when he needs something. His friends are his priority now, and I feel like I don’t even matter. He brushes me off whenever I try to talk and tells me to hang out with my friends instead. It wasn’t always like this; I used to mean something to him, but now I feel invisible.

My heart sank at her words. “Why are you still with him?” I asked, struggling to understand.

“Because I love him,” she replied, her voice wavering.

Again, she said, “You haven’t left Avantika yet, have you?”

You’re right,” I said, feeling the weight of her words. I wondered how love could make you do anything, even prioritize someone else over yourself. It was as if love often blinded you to your own worth.

“Why didn’t you tell me all this earlier?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

“I didn’t want to risk my relationship,” she admitted. “Mihir doesn’t like you, and you know how insecure he was at my birthday.”

I felt a pang in my chest. “Has Mihir become that important?”

She responded, “You’ve done the same; you chose Avantika over our friendship.”

Her words hit home, and I realized the irony in both our situations.

If I look upon now, I see that we were both grappling with the same struggle—no one was truly happy except Avantika and Mihir.

* * * * *

THE WEIGHT OF CHOICES

As the days of our internship rolled by, Avantika seemed busier than ever. I would call her, but she often brushed me off with a “baad mein baat karti hu, busy hu” or simply ignored my calls altogether. One day, tired of the same routine, I casually asked, “Are you planning to meet Mehul?”

She hesitated for a moment, “Might be... but I don’t know.”

As her vague response hung in the air, I felt a familiar ache settle in. It was like a reminder that when she wasn’t around, it felt as if she didn’t care or love me anymore. The distance was palpable, and it made everything feel starkly different, like we were living in two separate worlds.

And then, as if on autopilot, I found myself dialing Tanishka’s number every time. It just felt easy talking to her—no pressure, no drama. After all, we were just friends, and besides, she was in a relationship too, our conversations flowed naturally. We laughed about silly things, gossiped about teachers, and even mocked our classmates’ terrible fashion sense. At one point, we realized Avantika and Mihir were practically twins—both experts in drama.

Two months passed by like a blur, happiness fleeting as it always does. On the second-to-last day of our internship, Tanishka dropped the bomb.

Basu, now when we go back to college, we won’t be able to talk like we are doing right now,” she said, her voice trembling through the phone.

I felt a lump in my throat. “Why? Is Mihir really that important to you?”

She hesitated, as if searching for the right words. “I can’t risk losing him, especially when he’s already so insecure about you. I just... I don’t know how to balance it all.”

“So, you’re really going to let him dictate who you can be friends with?” I asked, frustration bubbling beneath the surface.

“It’s not like that!” she protested, her voice rising. “I care about you, but Mihir needs me. We can still be friends, just not like before—more like acquaintances.”

I shook my head, even though she couldn’t see me. The sting of her words hit harder than I expected. “You’re doing the same thing I did with Avantika. Choosing love over friendship? How did we end up here?”

“I didn’t want it to come to this,” she replied, her voice trembling. “But things have changed. I don’t want to hurt Mihir. You know he’ll create a scene if he finds out I’m talking to you. I just can’t do it. It’s like he’s become my priority now, and I can’t risk that, I’m sorry”

At that moment, I felt an overwhelming rush of emotions. Suddenly, I cut the call, unable to bear the weight of her words any longer. It hit me like a wave—I realized this wasn’t the same Tanishka I once knew, the one who had given me a Ted Talk about love in moderation.

Now, she was treading the same path I had feared, and jealousy clawed at me like a relentless beast. It was clear—Mihir had taken my place in her life, and I was just a lane she’d turn to when she needed comfort.

* * * * *

RETURN TO REALITY

As the internship came to an end, I headed back to college, but this time, excitement was nowhere to be found. It felt like stepping back into a world I had momentarily escaped. Back when everything was online during COVID, life had its complications, sure, but at least I knew what to expect. Now, it felt like the ground beneath me was shifting again.

I texted Avantika, letting her know I'd be reaching at 4 PM. She had already arrived that morning, likely all set up and ready to dive back into college life. I figured she'd want to meet up, so I added a casual "Milte hai?" to my message, hoping for a warm response.

When I landed and switched off flight mode, my heart raced at the notifications. There it was—one from Avantika: "Haan." Just that. No further elaboration, no excitement. It felt a bit like *déjà vu*; the familiar feeling of uncertainty creeping back in.

Determined to make the best of the situation, I stopped by a nearby shop, picking up some chocolates and a bouquet of flowers. A small gesture, but I hoped it would spark something, maybe remind her of the good times we shared before everything got so complicated.

Back at the PG, I texted Avantika that I had arrived. "Whenever you're free, we can meet," I added, keeping my tone light yet hopeful. After about twenty minutes, my phone buzzed with her reply: "Okay."

When she finally walked into my room, I grabbed her by the waist the moment she walked in, pulling her close as I whispered, "Hi, Miss Khargosh." That nickname always brought a smile to her face. I leaned in, rubbing my nose gently against hers in a way that only we understood.

With her still in my arms, I slid her to the study table and reached for the gift I had gotten—some chocolates and flowers. “For you, my khargosh,” I said softly, watching her reaction.

She smiled, taking the gifts from me, “Thank you!”

But something in me wanted more than just polite thanks. I leaned in closer, my fingers tracing the curve of her waist, my voice dropping to a teasing whisper. “Itna busy thi tu? Time nahi mil raha tha mere liye bhi?”

She sighed, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear in that way that always drove me a little crazy. “Nahi, kaam tha office mein yrr smjha kr,” she replied, her voice softer now, but distant. Then, with a small, mischievous smile, she added, “Ab bas college ke last 6 months bache hain.”

I smirked, pulling her even closer. “Ab bas college ke last 6 months bache hain or bas kuch nahi, sirf tum aur main... aur bahut saara sex” I whispered, as my lips drew close to hers.

She laughed, pushing me back playfully. “Haan, nikal ja kisi aur se le le” she teased, her eyes sparkling as she played along with the flirtation.

But I didn’t let go. My grip around her waist tightened as I pressed her against me.

“Itni hot bandi ke hote hue, kisi aur ke paas kyun jaaun?” I murmured into her ear, my breath brushing against her skin.

Her teasing demeanor faded for a second as she looked into my eyes. “Mere se ummid mat rakh”.

I pulled her even closer, refusing to let the moment slip.

Taking that as my cue, I gently brushed my thumb across her cheek, leaning in slowly until our lips met. The kiss was soft, unhurried—like we were savoring every second. Her laughter quieted as the moment deepened, and I could feel her heartbeat syncing with mine. My hands caressed her waist, pulling her closer, her body fitting perfectly against mine as the kiss grew more tender, more intimate. It wasn’t just about the physical connection; it felt like we were lost in each other, wrapped in a warmth that neither of us wanted to let go of.

I lifted her gently, her legs instinctively wrapping around me as I carried her to the bed, our breaths mingling. Her fingers tangled in my hair, pulling me closer with every step, as we fell together onto the sheets. At that moment, the outside world had ceased to exist.

As my lips traced their way down her neck, I felt her shiver beneath me, her breath catching with every kiss. Her skin was soft, warm, and intoxicating. I moved lower, my lips exploring, savoring every inch. But as I reached just below her ear, my lips brushing the side of her neck, I froze.

A mark—small, faint, but unmistakable—a hickey.

My heart skipped; my breath stilled. I pulled back slightly, my eyes fixed on it, the warmth between us suddenly shifting. For a moment, I stared, my thoughts racing as a thousand questions swirled in my mind.

As I pulled back, trying to make sense of what I was seeing, I straightened up and stared at her. Before I could say anything, Avantika, sensing my hesitation, asked, “Kya hua?”

Without thinking, I blurted out, “Yeh hickey kisne diya, Avantika?”

She looked at me, eyes wide, then burst out laughing, trying to brush it off. “Pagal hai kya tu? Kya bol raha hai?”

“Arey, koi kirde ne kata hoga ya kuch mark hogaya hoga,” she replied, waving it off casually.

I wasn't buying it. “. Itna bhi ch***ya nahi hu ki hickey aur kirde ke kaatne ka difference nahi pata chalega.”

She smirked, rolling her eyes. “Kirde ne kata hai, sach mein!”

I stood there, my fists clenched, unable to let it go. “It's Mehul, isn't it? That's why you've been distant, why you've been too busy for me.

She looked at me, her face hardening. “Are you serious right now? Tumhara dimaag kharab ho gaya hai? You're just making things up.”

“I'm not blind, Avantika! You've been avoiding me for weeks, ignoring my calls. And now... this? This mark?” I pointed at her neck, my voice rising with each word. “Don't tell me it's nothing.”

Awaz neeche rakho, Dev!” she hissed, glancing toward the door. “You don’t have the fucking right to shout at me like this!”

Then explain it to me! Why him? Why did you do it?” My heart was racing, a mix of anger and hurt flooding every part of me.

My voice rising again. “You think I’m stupid, Avantika? It’s him, isn’t it? Mehul! That’s why you’ve been avoiding me, right? Busy with ‘office work’? You’ve been lying to me this whole time!”

“Pagal ho gaye ho tum!” she shot back, her eyes narrowing. “You don’t know what you’re saying!”

“Don’t I?!” I yelled louder, stepping closer. “Stop lying! You think I can’t see it? You’ve been with him, haven’t you? That’s why you’ve been so distant!”

And then, without warning—*smack!*—her hand connected with my face, hard and sharp. The force of the slap left my cheek stinging, and I stumbled back a step, completely taken off guard.

She looked at me, her eyes burning with fury. “How dare you!” she shouted. “Tumhe koi haq nahi hai mujhpe awaaz uthane ka! You think I owe you an explanation? You think shouting at me gives you control over me?”

I stood there, my cheek throbbing, my mind racing. I couldn’t believe it—she actually slapped me. The anger mixed with hurt, confusion clouding my thoughts.

I clenched my fists, my voice shaking. “Why, Avantika? Why would you do this? Why would you lie to me?”

Her voice dropped, cold and final. “Jo sochna hai, socho. I don’t care. Bas. I’m done with this, done with you.”

Without waiting for my reply, she turned and stormed toward the door. The sound of it slamming behind her echoed in the empty room, leaving me standing there, still reeling from the slap.

Slowly, I turned toward the mirror hanging on the wall. Eyes hollow, filled with anger and regret, My cheek was red, but it wasn’t the physical

pain that hit me the hardest; it was the realization of what had just happened.

How did we get here?

How could I let it go this far? How could I be so blind? The weight of everything hit me all at once—her walking away, the silence between us, and the mess I had created.

I stared hard at myself, choking on reality. I had lost her. Maybe long before tonight.

Funny how the ones who say they'll never hurt you... always do.

I grabbed my phone and called Pavni and Palak, needing someone to talk to. They arrived quickly, looking concerned but curious. As we settled down, I took a deep breath and shared the whole messy story with them as I said tears came from my eyes

I took a deep drag from the cigarette I had lit, trying to calm my racing thoughts, but the tears started spilling over.

“Seriously, kya tumhe lagta hai wo is drame ke layak hai?” Palak added, concern creeping into her voice as she watched me struggle.

Pavni, sitting beside her, shook her head, her expression softening. “Bilkul! Humne toh kaha tha ki wo ladki hi ch****a hai. Tum uske paas kyun gaye phir?”

Her playful tone couldn't mask the genuine worry etched on her face.

“Chal, ro mat,” Palak said softly, reaching out to comfort me. “Aise ch****a ladkiyon ke liye kyun rone laga hai? Tum better deserve karte ho.”

“Sun, tera CAT ka paper hai 27th November ko! Abhi yeh sab chhod do aur padhai par focus kar,” Pavni insisted, her voice firm yet caring.

Their words echoed in my mind, a painful reminder of the choices I had made, and the tears flowed freely as I realized just how deep I had fallen into this mess.

“Listen, Dev,” Palak said, her voice gentle yet firm. “We'll always be here for you, but you need to sort this out. You can't let her drag you down like this.”

Pavni added, “Exactly! Focus on yourself for a change. You’ve got your exams coming up, and you need to give it your all.”

“Chal, hum chalte hain. Thoda time do apne aap ko,” Pavni said, standing up.

“Bhai, sab theek ho jayega,” Palak reassured me as they both prepared to leave.

“Thanks, guys,” I murmured, feeling a mix of gratitude and despair.

* * * * *

ECHOES OF THE UNSAID

Days passed, and with each class, I found myself caught in a whirlwind of emotions. Avantika was there, right in front of me, chatting animatedly with someone on a video call, her laughter ringing in my ears like a cruel melody. It felt like she was teasing me, like a cat playing with a mouse. My heart ached, and I couldn't focus on anything else. My gaze was glued to her, a magnet drawn to a constant source of confusion and pain.

Sometimes I questioned myself. *Kya meri galti thi? Uski thi?* I couldn't figure it out. All I knew was that instead of an apology, I had received a slap of reality—a stark reminder that she had moved on, while I was left shattered, struggling to pick up the pieces.

My mind was a foggy mess, and when the time for my CAT exam approached, I realized I couldn't even focus on studying. I was too busy replaying every moment with Avantika, trying to decipher if she had truly cared.

It was ridiculous. I wanted to share all these thoughts with Tanishka, but she seemed so absorbed in her so-called love story.

* * * * *

SHATTERED FOCUS

October rolled in with its familiar chill, yet it felt oddly empty. We hadn't spoken—no messages, no casual hellos, nothing. It was as if we were ghosts, ignoring each other's presence even when we shared the same space. I was trying to move on, focusing on preparing for my exams, drowning in quant problems that felt like a never-ending nightmare.

They say time plays a vital role in healing. **"Time doesn't erase the pain, but it does teach you how to live with it."** I thought, trying to make sense of it all. Each passing day was a step toward acceptance, or at least that's what I told myself.

In the midst of this chaos, I found solace in unexpected places. Believe it or not, I became surprisingly good at smoking. It was a ridiculous coping mechanism, but at least it provided a distraction.

Pavni and Palak were my constant companions, and despite their boyfriends being a pain in my side, they always kept me entertained.

One day, as we sat together, I couldn't help but tease them.

"Honestly, I think your boyfriends are more trouble than they're worth" tum logo ka taste mere se bhi kharab hai", I said with a smirk.

Pavni rolled her eyes and laughed. "Haan, isiliye aaj tu yahan baith ke apne decisions regret kar raha hai!"

Palak chimed in, "Exactly! Aur hum dono khud ke liye bhi tumhari tarah regret nahi kar rahe! Tumhare taste ka kya kehna bhai"

I chuckled, but deep down, their words struck a chord. It was true; while they teased me, I couldn't shake the feeling that my heart still ached

for Tanishka, someone who understood me better than anyone else ever could.

Even as I tried to keep my spirits up with my friends, the absence of Tanishka felt like a void I couldn't fill.

* * * * *

THE RETURN

And then, 14th October was just around the corner again, looming like a quiet reminder. This year felt different. The people I had relied on, those who once filled every corner of my life, had faded away over the last two years. Sure, there were friends around—Pavni, Palak, and others—but the ones I truly wanted by my side, they weren't there.

Pavni and Palak had planned a surprise for my birthday. They set everything up at my place, trying to bring back the spark, the excitement, but I wasn't feeling it like before. I didn't have the same energy, the same sense of anticipation. It was just another day—another reminder of how things had changed.

Around 11:55, there was a knock on the door. Palak got up and opened it, and I heard a familiar voice. My heart skipped a beat. When I walked to the door, I saw her—*Tanishka*.

She stood there, looking just like she always did, and for a second, it felt like time had stopped. But before I could even process it, I saw him too—Mihir, sitting on his so-called bike, waiting to drop her off. He didn't say a word to me, just glanced my way for a moment, then left without a second look.

I closed the door behind her and turned around, my mind racing. I couldn't believe she was here.

"You're here?" I asked, the words slipping out without thought.

She teased, her voice light, "Kya? Maine jau phir?"

I quickly said, "Nahi re, matlab how?"

Tanishka brushed it off, “Ye sab chhod, cake kaat le pehle ya gate pe hi mujhe sab puchna hai?”

We all laughed and gathered around as I cut the cake. After the celebrations, Tanishka handed me a gift—a sleek HRX jacket. This jacket is easily the most precious thing in my cuboid. Not that I don’t own expensive stuff, but this... this is different. It means something more.

After a few rounds of funny banter with everyone, I pulled Tanishka aside to the balcony. “Tu kaise aayi?” I asked, genuinely curious.

She smirked, “Arrey, tujhe khushi nahi hai toh main chali jaati hoon.”

“Arey pagal, aisa thodi hai,” I quickly responded.

“Mihir ne kuch nahi bola?” I asked, knowing how things had been between them.

She sighed, “Do ghante jhagra karke aayi hoon. I had to convince him that I had to be here tonight.”

Then she began sharing the whole story—what happened between them, the arguments, the reasons, everything. We stood there, the cool night breeze brushing against us.

And I gave her a friendly hug and said thanks for coming I really wanted you be there or apne boyfriend ko smjha de ch****a hai wo.

She laughed, giving me a light punch on the arm. “Chup hoja,” she muttered, but I could see the relief in her eyes, like she’d needed this too.

After that, we all laughed, our drinks in hand, the room filled with the kind of carefree chaos that only comes when everyone’s high on alcohol. People were cracking jokes, making fun of one another, and for a while, it felt like everything was just... easy.

Around 4 AM, there was a knock at the door. Tanishka’s ride had arrived. Mihir. He was here to pick her up.

She waved bye to everyone, a half-smile on her face, saying her byes before slipping out the door. The laughter in the room lingered, but there was something about her leaving that left a void behind at least for me.

As the door clicked shut behind her, I leaned back, staring at the ceiling, lost in thought. That day, I realized something—Tanishka and I would always be friends. No matter what happened, no matter who came or went, I wasn't going to let her go.

But... I chuckled to myself.

“Bas, iske liye Mihir ko jaan se maarna padega, Kyuki ye ladki iske pyaar mein bilkul pagal ho gayi hai.”

* * * * *

WAITING ON THE INEVITABLE

College days were also ending soon; only four months were left. The focus had shifted from studies to placements and other distractions.

Classes felt like a formality now, with everyone more concerned about landing jobs or just surviving the last stretch. Lectures became background noise, and the campus vibe was all about the future—interviews, resumes, and, of course, the constant pressure to figure out what came next.

In all this chaos, I was surprisingly chill. My results were out, and I scored 91.90 in my CAT. For a general category student, achieving this felt like breaking a curse in today's hyper-competitive world. I was thrilled—especially since it was my first attempt! I could almost taste the success and the excitement of getting into a good college.

Everyone congratulated me, except Avantika.

As I walked through campus, a wave of gratitude washed over me when I remembered Tanishka. She had come through for me during our summer internship break, lending me money to fill out my application form when I was completely broke. Although I returned the Favor a few weeks later, I wanted to acknowledge her kindness in a small way. So, I decided to give her a chocolate, a simple token of my appreciation.

Even though our conversations had dwindled to just the occasional “hi” or “hello” when we passed each other in the corridors, I wanted her to know that her support meant a lot to me.

When I gave her a chocolate, she simply said, “Thanks, koi zarurat nahi thi.” But I wanted her to know how much it meant to me.

I found myself wishing for Mihir and Tanishka's breakup once college was over. I knew it was wrong to hope for someone else's relationship to end, but I had always blamed that bastard for the distance between Tanishka and me.

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THE FINAL COUNTDOWN

Months passed, filled with interviews for different colleges. I was on a mission, determined to find the best fit for myself. The PR cells of some colleges were doing a fantastic job, spinning tales of grandeur and flashing impressive placement packages.

After talking to a few alumni and getting a sense of the real experience, I finally made a decision for my future: I accepted the offer letter from IIM Goa.

With that achievement, the reality of college ending started to sink in. The days were dwindling, and we regularly counted them down like it was a countdown to a rocket launch. “Only five days left!” I’d shout to my friends, and they’d roll their eyes, laughing at my dramatic flair. “Four more days!” I’d declare the next day, and the excitement in the air was palpable.

Finally, the countdown hit zero, and the day arrived: our farewell party. It was a bittersweet moment, the last day of college—a culmination of laughter, tears, and memories we’d forged together. We were all dressed up, ready to celebrate what had been an unforgettable journey, but deep down, I knew this was just the beginning of something new.

That day, my steps felt unsteady as I approached Avantika. I took a deep breath and asked, “Can we talk for a minute?” She nodded, a hint of curiosity in her eyes.

“Why? Aaj sach bata de,” I pressed, trying to keep my tone light, though my heart raced.

With a sigh, she replied, “Yeah, it was Mehul. And seriously, it was just that one time.”

I looked at her, a mix of emotions swirling inside me. “I’ll remember you for a lifetime,” I said, my voice steady. “You taught me that love shouldn’t be blind. Because of you, I learned to keep my eyes open.”

As the weight of the past hung in the air between us, I added, “And thanks to you, I found my best friend”

I nodded, feeling a sense of closure wash over me. With that, I turned and walked away, leaving behind the remnants of a relationship that had taught me so much. As I stepped into the fresh air, I felt lighter, ready to embrace whatever came next.

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OLD RHYTHMS, NEW REALITIES

After college ended, we were all gearing up to step out of our comfort zones and embark on our own journeys. With my college starting in June, I went home for a few days to recharge.

One day, feeling a mix of nostalgia and hope, I called Tanishka, secretly hoping that her breakup with Mihir would have finally happened.

“Hi, Basu! Kya haal hai?” she answered, her voice bright.

We fell into our old rhythm, chatting like nothing had changed. It felt good to connect again, to share laughs and catch up on life. The ease between us reminded me of all the good times we had shared, and for a moment, I forgot about the chaos that had come before.

After a few minutes of casual chatter, I mustered the courage to ask, “So, are you and Mihir still together?”

“Yeah, we are,” she replied, her tone surprisingly light.

I could sense she was still mad for him, but I didn’t push it. I knew she didn’t really want to dive into that topic—maybe she wasn’t comfortable, or maybe I wasn’t important enough for her to share those parts of her life with me anymore. So, I let it go, and instead, we talked about the good old college days, laughing at shared memories like nothing had changed between us. But deep down, I knew something had.

As days passed, the duration of our calls kept increasing. I was free, and so was she, and it felt like we were slipping back into the easy rhythm we used to have. But every now and then, when Mihir called her while we were on the phone, she’d cut my call immediately. It was clear who was more important.

I didn't say a word about it, though. I just went along with it, reminding myself that I was just her friend now.

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IIM GOA

And after weeks of waiting, June finally rolled in, and there I was—Goa. I was about to join the Indian Institute of Management Goa. Sounds crazy, right? I mean, who wouldn't be excited about this? IIM, new beginnings—it all felt like a dream.

But within 2 months, that dream crashed hard. I realized... I was in hell.

Hell, because this campus ran on just 3 hours of sleep—enough to survive the next 21 hours of madness. Friendship? Nah, it was all about forming diplomatic connections, carefully choosing your circle, because everyone was playing the long game. And if you were seen hanging out with someone of the opposite gender, rumours flew faster than campus Wi-Fi—people would jump to conclusions like, “Oh, they must be hooking up!”

But the real punch? That 20 lakhs we all invested? Yeah, not for the learning or the professors. Nope. It was for one thing and one thing only—placements. Everyone was there for that golden ticket. As for the professors? If you dared to ask them to review your paper, they'd just look at you and say, “Stop cribbing.”

And those exams? Ah, the midterms. You'd get the results of your last midterm... during the next midterm. Efficiency at its best.

It was a campus where the teachers had less power than the students—or those infamous ‘cells’ running everything.

I was one of the youngest in my class, and the subjects? Felt like a throwback to school, like I was sitting in standard 1 to 10 all over again—

mugging up facts without a clue. Critical thinking? Who needs that when you can just memorize everything, right?

But they took “discipline” seriously—only when it came to students, of course. If you were even a second late to the exam hall? Bam! You’re out. No second chances! But when meetings were supposed to start at 9:00 and the authorities strolled in at 9:45? “Oh, that’s totally cool!

They had a proper smoking zone—like, wow, what an achievement! But if that zone got too crowded? No worries at all! Just light one up in your room with the doors closed. Discipline at its finest, right?

A place where toxicity reached its peak, where everyone was competing against everyone else, whether in class or for placements. —there was no escaping the rat race!

And then there was relative marking—oh joy! If your peers scored just one mark higher than you, guess what? Your grades took a nosedive. It was like being stuck in a never-ending game of “Who Can Stress More?”

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MY ESCAPE IN THE CHAOS OF MBA

In the midst of all this chaos, I found myself sacrificing an hour of sleep to talk to Tanishka—the girl who brought my energy back. We spoke regularly, and even though Mihir was in her life, who cares? I was getting what I needed from those conversations. Just having her in my life made me genuinely happy.

That one hour felt like magic. It wasn't about me pouring out my entire day; it was her sharing hers. She'd start off with, "Tujhe pata hai, Basu, aaj kya hua?" And it could be anything—a kid showing up on our floor, followed **by his frantic mom searching for him.**

I listened to her with full concentration, completely awake and engaged, as she regaled me with the most boring yet amusing stories. Each word felt like a warm hug in the middle of a storm. It didn't matter that I was navigating through the whirlwind of deadlines and exams; for that brief moment, the world around me faded away, and all that mattered was Tanishka's laughter and the magic of our connection.

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WHEN FRIENDS BECOME CONFIDANTS

Every day, my morning *officially* began with Tanishka's "Good morning" text—around 10 AM, of course, she figured anything before 10 was still part of last night.

Days passed by in a blur, and we grew closer with each one. From her side, it was becoming more than just casual chats. As for me? I had always been close, at least as a friend. I still remember, she was the first person I called when I converted IIM Goa. That moment felt big, but what felt even bigger was how she started sharing things she held close to her heart—stuff she wouldn't tell just anyone. The way she shared with me, it reminded me of the bond we used to have, and all I wanted was to get back to that place we had before, the one I felt I had lost.

I guess this was the moment I could finally ask about Mihir. So, one night during our usual call, I casually brought it up.

"So, how's everything going with Mihir? You guys doing, okay?"

She sighed, "Where does he even have the time? We barely talk anymore. He's either at the gym or stuck in the office, and by the time night rolls around, he's already asleep by 10. He doesn't even call me..."

I decided to press a little more, the typical best friend question creeping in. "Tujhe dikhta kya hai usme?"

She paused before responding, a teasing tone in her voice. "Woh achha hai, kam se kam aaj tak toh mujhe cheat nahi kiya." She was clearly teasing me about Avantika.

Then she added, "But there's only one thing I don't like—he's very dominating."

How do you mean?" I asked.

She started sharing everything about Mihir—his dominating nature, the way he treats her, and how he was super possessive about everything. Yet, she also mentioned that deep down, he did care for her in his own way.

I asked her, "Toh why don't you leave him?" She replied, "I'm just waiting for things to get better. We're trying to sort things out."

I started to realize that she seemed to be over-investing in him while he didn't even seem to value her, it felt like she was dating someone who was always too busy for her, and it made me realize that Mihir was often too caught up in his own world to appreciate what he had.

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CLOSER THAN EVER, FARTHER THAN BEFORE

Now we were at a point where our conversations had no filters. We could talk about anything—whether it was her family, her annoying boyfriend, or the random chaos in our daily lives. Nothing felt off-limits, and that level of comfort made everything easier.

And honestly, that's what I had always wanted from Tanishka—a space where we could talk about anything, no pretences, just us being real.

One night, in the middle of our usual late-night conversation, I finally asked her, "Can we be best friends again?"

And with a teasing smile, she replied, "Yeah, but only if Avantika doesn't come back into your life!"

I asked for just one promise, a small one—"No matter who comes or who goes, we don't break this bond. If you ever feel it slipping, just look a little closer... don't let us fade."

And she assured with "promise I am not gonna break this"

This was all I ever wanted—a best friend in my life. **But, as they say, once you get what you want, you start expecting more.**

Day by day, talking to Tanishka became my habit. It was like my morning coffee—essential, energizing, and sometimes a little too much. But as much as I enjoyed our conversations, I couldn't help but wonder if getting too close was harmful. I started thinking that maybe this habit was turning into something I couldn't live without.

But Tanishka was in a totally different boat, trying to keep her relationship afloat while I was secretly wishing it would hit an iceberg. It's

not that I wasn't happy seeing her happy; I just couldn't stand that guy.
She deserved better—much better than the one she was dating.

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THE MISTAKE OF REGULAR CONVERSATIONS

Now every day, Mihir would do something ridiculous, and I'd have to listen to the entire story. Tanishka, of course, would narrate it like the latest episode of a soap opera.

"Basu, tujhe pata hai aaj kya kiya Mihir ne?"—and then I'd get the full episode.

It became a regular thing—me, sitting there like her unpaid therapist, while she described Mihir's latest antics. Honestly, it felt like I was stuck in a never-ending sitcom where Mihir played the lead, and I was the unfortunate audience who didn't even sign up for the show.

Days went by, and the toxicity between Tanishka and Mihir only intensified. Long-distance relationships were hard enough, but with Mihir? No distance seemed far enough to escape his overbearing nature. He constantly criticized Tanishka's habits, always asking her to change. It was like he wanted to mold her into someone else—an orthodox, controlling guy who needed everything done his way.

He even decided who she could follow on Instagram or which pictures she was allowed to post.

One night, we were on a call, and I could sense something was off. She sounded distant, quieter than usual. I tried asking her what was wrong, but she brushed it off at first. It wasn't until the fifth time I asked that she finally broke down, and I heard her sobbing through the phone.

I didn't even need to ask. I knew it was Mihir—the same reason she'd been upset so many times before.

Without hesitation, I said, “leave him, Tanishka. Waise bhi, shakal se leke akal tak, uska kuch bhi theek nahi hai. You deserve better, yaar. It’s better if you leave him.”

I paused for a second, and then added, “And wait—weren’t you the one who gave me that whole TED Talk about ‘love in moderation’? What happened to that, huh? Please, dude, do you really think you deserve this? C’mon, Tanishka, you deserve way more than some guy who treats you like this.”

She replied, her voice soft and shaky, “I’m trying, but... nahi ho pa raha hai. I need time to leave him. It’s not that easy.”

There was a pause on the line, and I could feel her struggle through the silence.

Sensing the heaviness in her voice, I quickly tried to switch the conversation, hoping to lighten the mood. “Chal, let’s talk about something else.

By the way, did you finally watch that new show I recommended, or are you still stuck on your so-called boring cartoon... oh wait, sorry, your ‘beloved’ anime series?” I teased, throwing in a bit of sarcasm to make her smile.

Nothing seemed to work at first; she was still lost in her thoughts. But after some effort, after throwing in a few more jokes and teasing her about her anime obsession, I finally managed to bring a small smile to her face. It wasn’t much, but at that moment, it felt like a win.

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ENGINEERING CHAOS AND BIRTHDAY BLUES

And here I was, battling every subject and every professor, just praying for this term to end. I mean, I couldn't stand another engineering subject! Like seriously, these engineers with their obsession over numbers and equations— If solving alien math problems was their thing why didn't they just stick to their engineering labs? What are they even doing here in an MBA—writing love letters to calculus?

And finally, after surviving 8 brutal exams—2 per day—I scribbled my way through the end term.

I walked into my first class of the second term, thinking, “Finally, a fresh start!” And what do I see on the board? QAM—full of x , y , α , β , σ !

Seriously, it felt like they were running some secret bootcamp for engineers.

I somehow survived four more lectures; each professor more confusing than the previous. By the end of the week, I realized I was wrong about the second semester being easier. With more engineering subjects and more alien math, I still had no clue what “sigma” actually meant.

Amid all this academic chaos, the most consistent part of my life was listening to Tanishka rant about Mihir's latest acts of possessiveness and controlling behaviour. It had officially become part of my routine—engineering subjects by day and Mihir's “greatest hits” by night.

And then, October crept in quietly. My birthday month. But honestly, I don't know what beef God has with my birthday. Every year, it's either the

best or the worst thing—no in-between. And the only way to figure out which one it is? Well, you've got to survive the whole year just to know.

I had enough surprises, though. I thought to myself, for the last three years, it felt like something chaotic happened every October. So, here's to 2023: please, just be good to me.

As October rolled in, companies buzzed onto campus like bees to honey, clipboard in hand and checklists at the ready.

After doing over a hundred iterations of our resumes, everyone in the campus was hoping for the shortlists, but let's be real—it was all a game of luck until you sat for that personal interview. Each company had its own set of absurdities; some wanted to maintain gender ratios and would only shortlist female candidates, while others seemed to have mysterious criteria that only they understood.

But I found no company that was actually looking for candidates who could perform T-tests with pen and paper. Instead, I was left wondering if my skills in Excel and PowerPoint would ever see the light of day in this madness.

Amidst this chaos, I got a notification on my phone: "Your parcel has been delivered." Confused, I blinked at the screen. I hadn't ordered anything. My curiosity piqued; I made my way to the parcel collection area.

When I opened the package in my room, I was greeted by a bottle of perfume and some skincare products. Yes, I was the kind of guy who dabbled in a five-step skincare routine, but only a select few knew about it. My thoughts drifted to Pavni and Palak; those two clowns had never even given me a free pen, so where on earth did this come from?

It didn't take long to connect the dots. Without a second thought, I snapped a picture of the gift and sent it to Tanishka with a quick thank you.

"Thought you might be expecting a watch, right?" she replied.

"Why's that?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"You don't remember Avantika's line?" she teased. "When she gifted you that watch, she said, 'If you give someone a watch, you're also giving

them a piece of your time.”

I replied “Yaad aaya”

“Absolutely,” she shot back, “but I think she was just keeping track of how much time you wasted on her.”

I couldn’t help but smile at her teasing. The playful banter was exactly what I needed to cut through the stressful week.

Here I was, drowning in company rejections and October chaos, yet Tanishka somehow knew how to make things feel light-hearted again.

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A BIRTHDAY BASH AND BREAKING NEWS

Finally, after three days of intense anticipation, my birthday had arrived. As I prepared for the chaos that usually accompanied this day, I prayed, “No surprises this year, God. Please.” But, well, God being God, I knew better than to expect any favors.

At midnight, my phone buzzed. It was Tanishka, sending her birthday wishes, her voice bright and cheerful.

I celebrated my birthday with a typical boys’ night out, which involved a whole lot of punches. The boys had a unique way of showing love—by beating the crap out of me. No questions asked.

The party raged on, fuelled by copious amounts of alcohol and cigarettes. By around 3 AM, I was officially “bhand,” completely out of it. As my friends started to drift away, they made sure to give me one last round of well-wishes before heading off. That’s when I got another call from Tanishka.

“How’s the birthday going?” she asked, but her voice was dull, lacking its usual sparkle.

By now, I could tell something was off. I had known her long enough to sense it in her tone that this call was about something serious. “What’s up? Just spill it, please. I’m not really in the zone right now,” I urged, sensing the weight in her words.

I broke up with Mihir,” she said, and my world stopped for a second.

“What the fuck?!” I exclaimed, the shock hitting me like a ton of bricks. I mean, part of me felt this exhilarating rush of happiness for her; she

deserved so much better. But another part of me was reeling. Just yesterday, everything seemed fine—what happened?

My mind raced to catch up. “What? How?” I managed to ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

She started crying, and that was the moment my buzz began to fade. I had never heard Tanishka cry like this before. There was real pain in her voice, a depth of sorrow that cut straight through my drunken haze. I could feel her heart breaking on the other end of the line, and it was like a punch to my gut. Suddenly, my birthday didn’t feel like a celebration anymore.

“Please, yaar, chup ho ja.” Just tell me what happened. Please, don’t cry,” I begged, trying to stay coherent while my head swirled with alcohol and confusion.

For the next 15 minutes, all I could do was try to calm her down. It felt like an eternity—every sob from her end made my heart sink lower. I wasn’t used to seeing her like this, so broken and vulnerable. She’d always been the strong one, the one who held things together.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, she began to speak. And as the words tumbled out, it was far worse than anything I could have ever anticipated. Mihir had said something so vile, so revolting, that I couldn’t even bear to repeat it. The kind of thing that made my skin crawl just from hearing it second-hand. It was that despicable.

No man with a shred of decency would say something like that—not to a stranger, and certainly not to someone he claimed to care about. The fact that she had to hear those words from someone she loved made it all the more horrifying.

“Tanishka, listen to me,” I said, my voice firm, almost cold. “If you ever speak to that guy again, I swear I won’t talk to you either. Not once. This isn’t love, it’s poison.”

There was silence on the other end. I could hear her breathing, her thoughts spinning in the quiet. I didn’t know if my words would change anything, but I had to try.

After a pause, she finally said, “No, I won’t talk to him anymore.”

“Good,” I replied, my voice firmer now. “If you’ve got even a shred of self-respect left, don’t ever speak to him again.”

She stopped crying, a quiet resolve in her voice. “I won’t,” she promised.

I sighed, relieved but still upset. “Just think, Tanishka. Because of him, how many people have you lost? For two years, you didn’t even talk to me on campus because he didn’t like it. And it wasn’t just me—he had issues with every guy you interacted with.”

There was a silence on the other end, but I could tell my words were sinking in. I had to push her a little further, though.

“Please, end this chapter. Your exams are coming up next month, and you need to focus on that. Give your 100%. I know it’s hard, but you *can* move on. Last year, I was in your shoes when Avantika cheated on me, but I had to pull myself together. Right now, your career is what matters most. Prioritize that.”

After another fifteen minutes of talking, her mood started to lighten. I could hear a faint smile in her voice, and the weight of the conversation began to lift, if only a little.

“Kal baat karu?,” I said, easing the conversation to a close. But before hanging up, something tugged at me.

“Ek baat aur kahoon?” I hesitated for a second, unsure if I should go on.

“Haan, bol na,” she replied softly.

I took a deep breath. “Aaj tak maine kabhi bola nahi, but you deserve so much better than this, Tanishka. **You deserve the kind of love that doesn’t make you cry, that lifts you up, not tears you apart. You deserve the world, and all the happiness that comes with it.**”

Her silence urged me on. “You deserve someone who looks at you like you are their everything, because you are. **Someone who makes you feel like you’re more than enough, not someone who makes you question your worth.** And honestly, I just want you to know... if anyone ever makes you feel less than that, they don’t deserve *you*.”

The line was quiet for a moment, but I could feel the emotion between us, hanging there, unspoken yet palpable.

Then, she spoke softly, her voice almost a whisper, “Thank you.”

After that, I hung up the call, feeling a mix of relief and concern for Tanihska. I checked my phone, hoping for some distraction, and found a notification from Avantika: *Happy birthday, Dev.*

I paused for a moment, contemplating whether to reply or just let it be. In the end, I typed back a simple, “Thank you.”

But as I stared at the screen, my mind drifted to deeper thoughts. *Is physical cheating more painful, or is it the emotional betrayal that truly breaks you?* It’s like asking which cuts deeper—the knife or the words that follow.

Physical cheating? Sure, it hurts, leaving bruises and a burning anger that eventually fades. But emotional betrayal? That’s a different beast. It haunts you. It’s a relentless echo that makes you question everything about yourself. Was I not enough? Did I miss the signs?

You don’t just mourn the loss of love; you grieve the death of your self-worth, drowning in a sea of self-doubt that feels inescapable.

I had experienced both with Avantika, and now I watched Tanishka suffer the same torment of emotional betrayal, her pain a mirror reflecting my own scars.

“It’s easier to mend a broken heart than to rebuild broken trust. One leaves scars; the other leaves doubts.”

“Beh****d,” I muttered to myself as I was about to hit the sack. “Bhagwan, please let me have at least one normal birthday. I can’t handle these many shocks every year!”

With that, I buzzed off, hoping for some semblance of peace amidst the chaos.

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HEALING TOGETHER

Slowly but surely, things began to shift. Tanishka was healing day by day, and I was right there, making everything possible for her. Each laugh we shared and each late-night conversation lifted her spirits just a little higher. The dark clouds were parting, revealing the sun that had long been hidden.

Our bond blossomed into something beautiful. We could talk about anything—family problems, dreams, fears—nothing felt off-limits.

It got to the point where if I didn't hear her say goodnight, I couldn't sleep. We talked so much that her voice became essential to my nights.

But as the days passed, something began to gnaw at me. While Tanishka and I were growing closer, I started questioning everything. Was this just friendship? Why did it feel so much deeper? I didn't want to overthink things, but I couldn't shake the feeling that our connection was crossing a line.

Why did it feel like I was becoming so attached? Was it the late-night conversations that lingered long after we hung up? I tried to remind myself that we were just friends, yet every laugh and every shared moment felt like a thread weaving us closer together.

What was I supposed to do with this? I didn't want to ruin what we had, but I couldn't ignore the way my heart raced when she laughed. It was both exhilarating and terrifying.

As the months passed, something shifted between us. My behavior toward Tanishka slowly started to change. The playful ease that once defined our friendship was fading from my side, replaced by something deeper, something more complicated. The questions I asked weren't just

the ones a friend would ask—they were the kind that came with layers of meaning, with intentions I didn't fully understand myself.

The late-night conversations didn't feel light anymore; they felt weighted, like each word was testing the boundaries of what we were. Friendship? It didn't feel like that anymore. Now, everything felt like a countdown to something more, something unspoken.

It was as if I was searching for something beyond friendship, even though I wasn't ready to admit it. When she laughed, it wasn't just her laughter I heard—it was the way my heart reacted, skipping a beat, betraying what I had been trying to suppress.

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THE SOCIAL SERVICE BOMB

And just like that, my third term was wrapping up. Before I could even think about catching a breath, the college decided to drop the bomb.

Apparently, after taking 20 lakhs in tuition, they figured, “Why not send these kids to do some free labor in the name of giving back to society?”

I opened the email with a sense of dread. A month of social service? Alright, let’s see where they were shipping us off. Scrolling through the Excel sheet, my eyes stopped at my name. **Rajasthan** I couldn’t help but laugh at the sheer ridiculousness of it all. Out of all the places in the country, they had to send me there.

But wait, it got better. Along with my golden ticket to the desert, there was a team list: **Vaibhav, Tanmay, Prashoon, and Kaustubh**. A solid mix of workaholics, alcoholics, and, well, the occasional free rider. Just perfect.

And the mission? Stopping tiger poaching in Ranthambore. Yeah, because who better to solve a wildlife crisis than a bunch of overworked MBA students? I mean, we were supposedly experts in critical thinking, right? But when I thought about it, our version of critical thinking seemed to boil down to something much simpler: just asking ChatGPT, “What’s the best way to save tigers? And can you break it down into bullet points, please?”

When I shared my plans with Tanishka, she burst out laughing. “Ranthambore? That’s near Haridwar, right?”

I couldn’t help but think, “**How does she know the Indian map better than I do?**”

“Yeah, I guess so!” I replied, trying to sound confident.

I grinned, “So, we can totally meet up then!”

She nodded, “Haan, mil sakte hain!”

The only problem was how to convince my team to let me leave for a few days to meet Tanishka. I could already picture the conversation: “Hey, guys, I know we’re supposed to be the tiger saviours of Ranthambore, but I’ve got a more pressing matter—like hanging out with Tanishka. So, if you could just hold the poachers here while I go rescue my social life, that’d be great!”

I could already picture their shocked faces as they processed the idea of me ditching them to meet a girl, trying to explain that to a bunch of guys who thought “friend” meant “potential girlfriend.” I’d have to somehow convince them that it was totally normal to prioritize friendship over saving the tigers.

When we landed in Ranthambore, I quickly realized something: Rajasthan had some pretty decent people. Which led me to one simple conclusion—Avantika? Definitely a factory defect. I mean, how can an entire state be filled with nice folks, and yet she’s the one glitch?

Anyway, our reporting officer kindly informed us we had a meeting scheduled for the next day. In this scorching heat? Fantastic. Naturally, we needed a solution. That’s when Kaustubh came up with the most logical conclusion: beer. It was the perfect antidote to being roasted alive.

So, we grabbed a few bottles and settled in for the evening. Well, except for Tanmay—the token guy in every group who thinks cold drinks and snacks are as thrilling as life gets. He was probably off sipping Coke somewhere, and we didn’t say a word because, honestly, he was the only real workaholic among us. The rest? Free riders or alcoholics,

But my real challenge was figuring out how to sneak out early without making it seem like I was ditching tiger-saving duty for something a bit more important.

After a few rounds, I decided it was time to drop the bomb. “Guys, listen, I need to head out the day after tomorrow. I’m meeting up with Tanishka.”

A stunned silence fell over the group. Then the laughter erupted.

“Wait, so tu yahan project chhod ke ek ladki se milne ja raha hai?!” Kaustubh exclaimed, wide-eyed.

“Ladki ka chakkar, babu bhaiya!” Vaibhav chimed in, winking like he’d just solved a mystery.

Prashoon, “*jiski zaban se zyada sakal kali thi*,” couldn’t resist throwing in his two cents. “Bhai, tujhe sex nahi milega! Tu mat ja, woh periods mein hogi, dekh lena!” he said, shaking his head as if I’d just committed the ultimate crime against humanity.

I couldn’t help but think, *Kya bolu in sabko?*

But somehow, they were all convinced—it must be the magic of alcohol. Well, except for Tanmay, the sober one in the group. The Coke-sipping legend had been uncharacteristically quiet, staring at me with the cold drink bottle in hand, silently judging my life choices. *Perfect example of maintaining diplomacy.*

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THE MORNING AFTER

The next night, I was at the train station, a ticket clutched in hand like it was my golden ticket to an adventure. By 6 AM, I stepped off the train in Haridwar, greeted by the serene beauty of the place. I could feel the excitement bubbling inside me as I took a cab to Tanishka's apartment.

As I stepped out of the cab, my eyes landed on her waiting for me downstairs. For a moment, the world faded away. Tanishka was a vision in a soft pink night dress, the kind that seemed to glow in the early morning light. And let me tell you, it was less "friendly vibes" and more "you might need a life jacket for this wave of feelings!"

We exchanged a side hug, and I felt a rush of warmth.

"Itni subah ki hi train mili thi," she said, her voice still laced with sleep, a playful smile curling on her lips.

"Arey, maine aaya, wo nahi kaafi hai?" I replied, attempting to keep it light.

Once inside her apartment, she glanced at me and said, "Maine thodi der so rahi hoon. Tu bhi dusre kamre mein so ja."

"Waah, kya treatment hai!" I thought, feeling both amused and honored by her casual invitation.

With her voice fading into the background, she drifted off to sleep. Meanwhile, I pulled out my laptop to finish some work. I needed to wrap up everything so Tanmay wouldn't have any complaints.



CONVERSATIONS AND CONFESSIONS

By the time the clock struck 10, there was a soft knock on my door. Tanishka stood there, now more awake, her eyes sparkling with that familiar mischief.

We spent the morning catching up, and I told her everything about how I managed to convince my team to let me come here.

She talked about her B-school interviews—apparently a nightmare involving corporate jargon and an interviewer who looked like he hadn't slept in days. We even did a little post-mortem on Mihir, with the mutual conclusion that he was, in fact, a certified *ch***ya*. Though, I could still sense a part of her that hadn't fully let go of him, a little flicker of something deep down.

After that we decided to step out for a bit and headed to her so-called favourite restaurant—Kalsang Café. She had hyped it up so much, but when we bit into the momos, the disappointment hit harder than I expected. “Yeh toh hostel ke mess wale momos jaise taste kar rahe hain,” I joked, and she laughed, but even she couldn't defend them. So much for that recommendation!

After the tragic momo incident, we grabbed some beers and headed back to her place for a low-key Netflix and chill session.

After a long discussion about what movie to watch, we were stuck between her obsession with anime and my love for Srk. But after a bit of back-and-forth, we settled on something we both could tolerate—*The Conjuring*. Horror and beer—perfect combo!

We stretched out on her bed, sharing a blanket as we leaned back, heads resting against the wall, our legs stretched out in front of us, we

cracked open the cans, and with the cold fizz bubbling up, the room was comfortably dim, with just enough light from the TV flickering across her face. She was fully absorbed in the film, while I found myself getting lost—not in the film, but in her.

We sat side by side, occasionally sipping our beers. I tried to focus on the movie, but all I could think about was her—sitting right next to me, so close yet so far from where I wanted her to be. She looked so relaxed, but my heart was racing faster than it had any right to, given that *The Conjuring* wasn't exactly terrifying me.

I was thinking about what I really wanted to tell her—what I had been holding back for so long.

My heart raced faster than the spooky soundtrack. Should I just blurt it out? Tell her how I actually feel?

The movie was halfway through, but I couldn't hold it in any longer. I took a deep breath, my heart pounding, and decided to ask.

I turned towards her; my voice low. "Ek baat bolu?"

She paused, beer can halfway to her lips, and glanced at me. "Haan, bol na," she said, taking a sip like it was no big deal. But for me, this moment felt monumental.

"Tanishka we are not on the same page" my words stumbling out.

There was no dramatic *I love you*, no grand declaration. It was simpler, more honest. Just like how she had told me once.....

I had fallen for her, and now it was out there.

She stared at me for a moment, then set her beer down on the table, her expression soft but serious.

"Dev, this time... there was no *Basu*, just Dev," she said quietly, like she was piecing her thoughts together. "Kya hogaya aisa?"

I felt a lump in my throat, but I knew I had to be honest. "I don't see you as just a friend anymore. You're not just someone I care about; you're becoming my everything," I confessed, my heart racing as the words left my mouth.

She sighed, the smile still lingering but fading quickly. “Abhi... I can’t see anything, Dev. I can’t build trust again,” she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

I could see the alcohol swirling in her eyes, but it wasn’t just that—it was everything she was holding back. Her words cut through the quiet, soft yet loaded with meaning. “Abhi bhi kuch hai... for Mihir... I don’t know what, but there’s something.”

I could feel her struggling to make sense of it all, her eyes glistening as if holding back more than just alcohol. She continued, her voice trembling, “But I don’t want to see anyone that way right now, Dev. Sometimes... I feel worthless, like I’m just... lost.”

Tears began to well up in her eyes, and I felt something twist in my chest. Without thinking, I pulled her into a side hug, her head resting gently on my shoulder.

“You’re not worthless” I whispered, feeling the weight of her emotions. “You’re the best person someone can have.”

She stayed there, her breathing slowing, as if the words were a balm she needed but didn’t know

She pulled back slightly, just enough to look at me, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. Her voice was soft, almost breaking. “Hum... bas dost rehte hain na?” she whispered, her words laced with a quiet desperation, as if she was holding onto something fragile.

“If you don’t want dosti, Dev, we can cut it out. I know this feeling you have, but I’m sorry...” She looked away, blinking rapidly, trying to hold it together. “I know you’ve helped me a lot, but... maine ab uss way mein nahi dekhti hoon. I’m really sorry.”

Her voice cracked on the last words, and I could see the guilt and conflict in her eyes. She wasn’t just saying no—she was struggling, torn between what she knew and what she felt. It was clear she wasn’t ready, not for this, not for us.

I took a deep breath, and smiled softly. “It’s fine, really. Let’s just be the way we were. I need you in my life, more than any tag or label,” I said, my voice steady, though my heart was anything but.

For a moment, she looked at me, her eyes searching mine, and then she reached out, gently taking my hand. “Thank you for understanding,” she whispered, her fingers tightening slightly around mine, as if to say more than words ever could.

I squeezed her hand back, trying to lighten the moment. “Aur ye ‘worthless’ ka weightage lekar mat ghoom,” I said with a smirk, “you’re far too important for that.”

After that, we drank the beer, the movie still playing in the background, but neither of us cared. We were starting to feel buzzed. She began talking about Mihir, the one person I hated most. She shared everything—how much he had broken her, how deeply it hurt. I could see her eyes welling up again as she spoke, each word weighed down with pain.

I hugged her gently, this time wiping away her tears, just like she had done for me during the whole Avantika mess.

After that, something happened that couldn’t be described in words—a moment that blurred the lines between friendship and something deeper. It wasn’t planned, it wasn’t forced; it just...happened.

Rather happened again.

* * * * *

BOUNDARIES

I had one more day left in Haridwar, and as much as I cherished the moments we spent together, it was becoming increasingly clear that staying “just friends” was going to be a struggle. I could see it in Tanishka’s eyes; she hadn’t completely moved on from Mihir. No matter how many times I tried to pull her away from those memories, it felt like she was anchored to them, a ship lost at sea.

“Tanishka,” I said as we sat on her balcony, the city lights twinkling below us. “You’re so much more than your past. Don’t let him define your worth.”

Her eyes glistened with tears. “Mujhe nahi pata, Dev. Kabhi kabhi lagta hai ki main kuch bhi nahi hoon.”

I brushed the stray hair behind her ear. “That’s not true. You’re beautiful and smart. Don’t let Mihir’s mistakes affect how you see yourself.

We talked for hours, sharing stories, laughter. Despite the underlying tension, those two days flew by in a blur of comfort and companionship. But as the clock ticked closer to my departure, a heaviness settled in my chest. I didn’t want to leave.

When it was time to say goodbye, Tanishka stood by the door, her expression a mix of gratitude and something I couldn’t quite place. “Dev, I’m glad you came. But please, let’s try to keep our boundaries. I don’t want to go beyond friendship,” she said softly.

My heart sank at her words. “I understand,” I replied, forcing a smile. “But it’s hard to see you as just a friend. You mean so much to me.”

She stepped closer, her gaze unwavering. “I’m not ready for anything more. I want to stay friends, Dev.”

“Okay,” I said, the weight of her request heavy on me. “I’ll respect that. Just know I’ll always be here for you.”

As I walked away, I felt a bittersweet ache in my heart. Tanishka was right; we needed boundaries, but deep down, I knew I was already beyond boundaries.

* * * * *

SUMMER REFLECTIONS

After our bittersweet goodbye, I headed to Mumbai for my summer internship. The city buzzed with energy, but every evening, I made it a point to call Tanishka as soon as I got back from the office.

We talked about everything—from work woes to college gossip. Tanishka would share stories about her life, and I would listen intently, always trying to be the supportive friend she needed. Yet, at the back of my mind, I knew I had deeper feelings for her that she wasn't aware of.

One evening, Tanishka casually mentioned, "Mihir called me today." I could hear the tension in her voice. "I picked up, but it didn't feel the same as before. He was trying to manipulate me again."

I felt a pang of anger. "You need to cut him off completely. Just tell him it's over and don't take his calls," I urged, trying to console her.

"I did tell him," She replied softly. "I said, 'Don't call me again.' It was liberating, but... it still hurts."

I could sense she was slowly beginning to heal, but I also realized that she viewed our relationship purely as friendship. That realization stung, but I pushed it aside for the moment.

Then one night, around 3 AM, my phone buzzed, pulling me from my sleep. It was Tanishka.

"Dev," she said, her voice bright and bubbling with excitement, "I got accepted into St. Xavier's for my MBA!"

My heart raced. I guess I was the first person she wanted to share this news with. "Wow, that's amazing! I'm so proud of you!" I exclaimed, feeling a surge of joy for her.

“Thank you! I couldn’t wait to tell you, “She said, and I could hear the smile in her voice. In that moment, everything felt perfect, as if our bond was growing stronger, despite the boundaries we had set.

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A DAY TOO SHORT

It was the last week of my internship. During one of our usual calls, Tanishka casually mentioned, “I’m coming to Mumbai to meet my sister before heading off to B-school. I really need a vacation.”

I felt a surge of happiness. “Mil sakte hain phir?” I asked, hoping to see her one more time before everything changed.

She paused for a moment. “But won’t your internship be over by then?” she replied.

“Woh sab chhodo, tu bas aaja,” I said, my voice laced with excitement. I could already picture us meeting again, like old times. But in her tone, I sensed she wasn’t as eager as I was.

Still, the thought of seeing her made me happy. She was coming a week after my internship was ending and even though my work would be done, I told myself I’d wait an extra week—just to meet her for a few hours. Men do such things in love.

The day came, and we met at the mall, a place that felt far too ordinary for a moment that meant so much to me. When I saw her sitting there, I couldn’t keep my emotions in check. She looked like the most beautiful girl in the world—effortlessly stunning. My heart raced in a way it never had with Avantika. “When you meet the right person, everything feels different. It’s like you finally understand why nothing ever worked out before.” That’s what it felt like with her.

I handed her a handwritten card, every word an attempt to convey just how important she still was to me. I also gave her a box of her favourite chocolates, hoping it might take her back to a time when everything felt

simpler, sweeter. She smiled politely, offering me a cute key ring in return—thoughtful.

After a few minutes of pointless conversation, we decided to watch a movie. It was an ordinary decision, but somehow, in that dimly lit theatre, I found myself wanting to hold her hand. It was irrational, I knew that. She was my friend, nothing more. Yet, the urge to reach out and feel her fingers entwined with mine was strong. I hesitated for a moment before I slowly did it. And then, she gently pulled her hand away. It wasn't abrupt or dismissive—just a soft, subtle gesture, but it spoke louder than words ever could. She was still standing firmly in the realm of friendship, while I was crossing a line I shouldn't have.

After the movie, she had to leave. I offered to book a cab, knowing this might be the last time I'd see her for years. I watched the minutes pass, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in my chest. But when I looked at her, I knew she didn't feel the same.

As she got into the cab, a quiet sadness settled in. I tried to shake it off, but the thought lingered. **Maybe this meeting wasn't what she had wanted at all.** The truth hit me like a punch in the gut—perhaps I had been asking for too much, my emotions clouding my judgment of what was really happening between us.

“Expectation is the root of all heartache,” they say. And as I watched her cab disappear into the distance. Maybe, just maybe, I had been hoping for something she was never ready to give.

And the hardest part? I had waited an entire week in Mumbai just for these five fleeting hours.

* * * * *

SHIFTING TIDES

As the weeks went by, I could feel our conversations changing. What used to flow effortlessly began to feel forced, filled with unspoken feelings. I was asking questions that blurred the lines of our friendship. “How important am I in your life?” I asked, half-joking but serious.

There was a pause, and I could sense her hesitation. Our laughter faded, replaced by polite smiles and vague replies. Tanishka no longer seemed fully engaged, and I could feel the weight of my expectations growing heavier.

What we once cherished felt different, but we weren’t losing our friendship. Instead, I was caught between wanting to maintain our bond and navigating the complexities of my evolving feelings.

* * * * *

BACK TO CAMPUS

As my internship wrapped up, I returned to campus, now as a senior. The atmosphere buzzed with excitement, with everyone's eyes glued to the juniors, like kids in a candy store. Our batch's gender ratio was a disaster, and it felt like every guy had become a self-appointed scout for the fresh faces.

Classes had taken a sharp turn. No more cramming theories or memorizing. Now, it was all about critical thinking and truly understanding how businesses operate. Professors weren't interested in "case-wase" studies or textbook answers anymore—they wanted us to think on our feet, solve real-world problems.

Tanishka was also preparing for her B-school journey at St. Xavier's and we still talked regularly on the phone. I gave her a few tips here and there—how to handle the workload, deal with professors, or just survive the chaos. She'd listen patiently, sometimes rolling her eyes at my advice, but I could always sense that small smile on the other end.

Being back on campus felt both chaotic and oddly comforting.

* * * * *

FADING CONVERSATIONS

After a few days, Tanishka finally stepped into her new B-school life at St. Xavier's. As she settled into the daily grind of assignments and the inevitable toxic environment that B-schools brings, we still talked regularly. But things had started to change. The long, easy conversations we used to have slowly shrunk, with each passing day cutting our calls shorter.

Initially, I didn't think much of it. Adjusting to a new college was overwhelming, and I knew she had a lot on her plate. After some days, it was clear that something had changed. Whenever I called, it felt like she was in a hurry to end the conversation, as if there was an unspoken rush to hang up.

One night, after another half-hearted conversation, I finally asked, "Tujhe baat nahi karni hai toh bol de, hum roj baat nahi karte hai."

She paused, and I could hear her taking a breath. "Manage nahi kar pa rahi hoon. It's just... everything's so hectic. Hafte mein ek-do din baat kar lete hai, theek hai?"

I just nodded and said, "Okay."

It hit me hard. This was the same girl for whom I would gladly lose sleep, just to talk for an hour longer. I used to treasure those conversations. But now, it felt like I was an obligation, something to tick off her list.

Nonetheless, I said, "It's okay."

* * * * *

ONCE CLOSE, NOW FAR

The mornings felt painfully quiet now—no more ‘good morning’ texts from her, no little moments that made the day feel lighter. Whenever I messaged her, the reply would come hours later, cold and distant, as if she were replying out of obligation, not care.

The nights were worse. **She stopped saying goodnight, and I stopped sleeping.** My mind became a battlefield of unspoken words, of memories that now felt more like ghosts haunting the silence.

I couldn’t help but ask myself—was it because I had confessed my feelings? Or was it something else? Back when she needed someone to help her move on from Mihir, I was there, a constant, the one she leaned on. But now that she was happy again, moving forward with her life, maybe she didn’t need me anymore. Maybe I was just a chapter she was ready to close, a part of her past she no longer wanted to carry. And the cruellest part of it all? I would have stayed, even as a forgotten page, just to feel like I was still somewhere in her story.

It hit me then—**priorities aren’t about having time; they’re about making time.** I used to make time for her, no matter how busy life got. But maybe, for her, I was a priority only when she had no one else, when her days were free, and when she needed someone to listen to her.

And every night, I found myself waiting for her call, staring at my phone like some unspoken promise would be fulfilled. But the calls never came. Not anymore. The silence on the other end felt heavier than it used to.

Sometimes, when I couldn’t bear the silence, I’d text her. “Busy?” hoping she’d say something more, something that would bridge the

growing gap between us. But all I got was a short, dismissive reply: “Yeah, just a little busy.”

It wasn’t just at night anymore; it crept into my days too. Whether I was sitting in class, pretending to focus, or trying to lose myself in something else, the thought of her absence would hit me—relentlessly.

I found myself stuck in a loop of waiting—waiting for her texts, her calls—anything to make me feel like I still mattered in her life. But nothing came.

I’d see her name pop up on my screen, but it wasn’t the same. Conversations that used to flow so naturally were now stilted, forced, and half-hearted.

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A CALL IN THE NIGHT

It had become some sort of unspoken rule in our cluster—every weekend, no matter how chaotic our MBA life got, we'd party. Because what better way to handle the pressure of endless assignments, presentations, and exams than drowning them in cheap rum and bad decisions? It was one of those nights, where we'd decided to "celebrate" surviving another week. The drinks were flowing, the music was loud, and everyone was just trying to pretend life wasn't as exhausting as it was.

Everyone was cracking one of their usual over-the-top jokes, and I was, trying to blend in, holding a half-empty glass, when my phone buzzed on the table. I glanced down and saw *Tam* flashing on the screen.

For a second, I didn't know how to feel. There was no excitement, no rush of adrenaline—just the weight of something that had once been easy and natural. I excused myself, leaving my drink behind as I walked out of the noisy room and headed to my own.

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I stared at the phone for a moment before picking up the call.

"Hey," I answered, my voice steady but devoid of the warmth it once had.

"Free hai?" she asked.

"Haan," I replied, keeping it simple.

"Kya chal raha hai?" I tried to make small talk.

"Nothing much," she sighed. "Bahut kaam hai college mein. Placement cell yaha p subha 5 bje meeting rkhta hai." She started talking about the toxic culture of B-school, how everything revolved around placements, the

never-ending pressure, and how exhausting it had all become. I listened quietly, letting her vent. I knew what it felt like; I had been there just a year ago.

“Tana maarte hue,” I said, “Mujhe yaad hai, I was in the same shoes. But maine time nikaal ke baat karta tha roz. Manage karna padta hai na?”

She paused, and I could almost hear the irritation in her voice when she replied, “Tu kar leta hoga. Main nahi kar pa rahi.”

“Kr nahi pa rahi ya krna nahi chahti ho?” The words slipped out sharper than I intended.

There was a moment of silence on the other end. Maybe she hadn’t expected me to be this blunt. Maybe I hadn’t either. But it was out there now, hanging between us, waiting for her to respond.

There was a slight shift in her tone, something defensive. “Main tumhari girlfriend nahi hoon jo roz tumhare liye time nikaalun,” she said, almost like she wanted to put up a wall between us.

I felt a pang in my chest, but I stayed calm. “I know,” I replied, my voice steady, “but last year bhi toh tum meri girlfriend nahi thi, right? Phir tab kyun baat hoti thi roz?”

She sighed, as if she had already thought of this answer. “Wo tum apni marzi se baat karte the, apne consent se. I didn’t ask for it.”

I paused, her words sinking in. I wanted to say more, but she didn’t give me the chance.

“Ab mere paas time nahi hai. I’m busy, and I need time for myself. Last year itna kuch nahi tha mere paas karne ko.”

Her words felt colder than they probably were meant to. But they hit me hard, and for a moment, I had no idea what to say.

She was right. Friendship didn’t come with a rulebook, and it didn’t require daily conversations. I wasn’t her boyfriend, and I had no right to expect her to call me regularly. That wasn’t part of the deal.

“Yeah,” I mumbled, more to myself than to her. “I’m not your boyfriend. Why would you need to talk to me every day?”

But deep down, it stung. Because even though we weren't in a relationship, it had felt like we were something... more. Or maybe I had just convinced myself of that.

And now, she doesn't need to call me.

"Chor ye sab," she sighed, her voice tired, almost frustrated.

"Nahi," I interrupted, my tone firmer than I intended. "It's hurting me."

"Hurting what?" she snapped back, confusion and irritation laced in her words. "I never gave you any hope. I never said anything like that."

I paused for a second, feeling a weight settle in my chest. "But I was just a time pass for you, right?"

"No!" she shot back. "I talked to you as a friend. That's all."

Please, for God's sake, chor ye sab," she pleaded, her voice now low, almost as if begging me to let it go. "Tu apne placements pe dhyan de, and let me focus on my life too. We both have too much going on."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and forced a response, "Hmm... okay."

"And yeah, I'm going now, kal 8 baje class hai meri," she added. "Phir kabhi baat karte hain."

Desperation edged into my voice, "5 minutes aur baat nahi kar sakte?"

"Nahi," she said firmly, the finality in her tone hitting me like a brick.

"Goodnight," she said, and the line went dead before I could even respond.

I looked at the screen—19 minutes and 12 seconds. A call that used to last for hours—those late-night 2.5-hour conversations—reduced to mere minutes.

After the call ended, I just sat there, staring at the phone, the weight of everything pressing down on me. I felt like I was drowning in questions, doubts, and an emptiness I couldn't shake.

Was she right? Or had I crossed some invisible line? The questions swirled in my head like a storm I couldn't escape.

I wondered if I was the one who had messed it all up, by confessing my feelings, by expecting things to stay the same.

I opened WhatsApp and typed, my fingers shaking as the words spilled out, ***“I can’t do this anymore, Tanishka. It’s not even about my feelings for you... it’s about something more. Last year, I was the same—busy, stressed, drowning in things I had to do. But I still made time for you. Not because it was convenient, but because you mattered to me. And now, I feel like I don’t matter at all, I just want your friendship the way it was before, if not then let’s end this, let’s not be best friends anymore...!”***

I stared at the message, rereading it over and over, my heart racing as I fought the urge to just delete it all. But I didn’t. I hit send, knowing that with those words, something between us had shifted—maybe for good.

The message ticked ‘delivered,’ and I sat there, staring at it, waiting. Waiting for what, I didn’t know. Maybe for her to understand. Maybe for her to care. Maybe just for a sign that everything I was feeling wasn’t in vain. But the longer I waited, the heavier the silence felt.

I just wanted to be in her life, like I always had been, to matter in the way I once did. Her presence made me happy—*not because I wanted something more*, but because just knowing she was there made everything else in life a little easier to bear.

Sometimes, it’s not about holding someone close, but knowing that they’re out there, existing, and that’s enough to keep your heart from breaking completely

But that night, the silence stretched longer than I could bear. I held my breath, hoping for something, anything. Maybe she’d realize how much I just wanted things to be okay between us. How much I missed the way we were.

Then, the next day, my phone buzzed.

*“Okay, as you wish. So... **Can we be strangers again?**”*

And in that moment, it felt like the final thread snapped.

I was expecting something different. Something that would tell me she understood, that maybe she still cared in the way I hoped. But instead, I was just that friend whose absence wouldn't leave a mark. *"Maybe I was just a fleeting chapter in her story, one that had to end for her to move forward. While she was my whole book, I was merely a few pages she could easily turn past"*

* * * * *

THE WEIGHT OF WHAT'S LEFT

And now, here I am, sitting with her keychain in my hand, tears filling my eyes, remembering everything. I kept hoping, wishing that somehow, things would just fall into place.

In the chaos of it all, I didn't know what to do. Every day felt like a battle between holding on and letting go. I was waiting, constantly checking my phone, hoping for a text or a call that never came. Just silence.

Meanwhile, life didn't stop. I had to push through the motions—classes, assignments, exams, and the looming pressure of final placements. All of it felt like a blur, like I was going through the steps of my life while my mind was still stuck somewhere in the past, trying to make sense of a puzzle that had no solution.

I had friends who understood me, people who tried to fill that void. But no matter how much they tried; nothing could erase the weight of her absence. ***“How do you move on from someone who once meant everything, and now they're just a memory—a stranger wearing the face of someone you used to know?”***

As the weeks started passing, the whirlwind of campus placements hit us with full force. October came knocking, and with it, the high-stakes rush to justify those 20-lakh fees we had shelled out for our degrees. The atmosphere was toxic —placement week was in full swing. Companies began flooding the campus, everyone's inbox became a battlefield of CVs and shortlist confirmations, and on the 7th of October, I finally got my first big break.

I didn't know whether to feel relieved or more nervous. The nights were no longer about sleep; they were about mock interviews, rehearsing answers, trying not to sound like a robot but also not to mess up the one chance I had. That whole night, I was stuck in a cycle of reciting questions, anticipating what they might ask. By morning, I looked like a zombie, but no time for that—I had to get into Western business formals, clean-shaven (which I absolutely hated).

The day was a marathon. First, it was an aptitude test, a ruthless group discussion, and, as if I hadn't been put through enough, two rounds of intense interviews. By the time I reached the final round, my heart was doing laps, and I was functioning on sheer adrenaline. But then, it happened.

And then, it happened.

When the Placement Committee member called my name, I didn't know what to expect. She looked at me, smiled, and said, "You got placed."

For a second, I just stood there. It was everything I'd worked for, all the late nights, all the stress—it had led to this. Without a second thought, I hugged her right there in front of everyone. The recruiters, the candidates—they all saw it, but at that moment, I didn't care.

After that, I stepped outside, feeling like I was floating. I called my parents immediately, their voices a mix of pride and joy on the other end of the line. And then, before I even realized it, my thoughts turned to Tanishka. Without thinking twice, I typed, "Hey, I got placed." I hit send... and then, something stopped me. A sudden hesitation. I stared at the message, and a wave of uncertainty hit me. I deleted it.

I didn't know why I did it, but I couldn't reach out to her—not like this. Something had shifted, maybe it was the quiet realization that some things just aren't meant to be rekindled. I remembered when I first got into IIM Goa—I'd called her before anyone else. She was the one I'd wanted to share everything with. But now, something stopped me.

"Sometimes, the hardest part isn't letting go; it's accepting that the person you once turned to first is now a stranger."

Days passed, and once again, on the 14th, this year, I found myself feeling least excited about my own special day. The hours passed in quiet anticipation, each notification making my heart race, wondering if it might be her. I kept waiting, hoping for that one message from Tanishka. But as the night deepened, the silence grew heavier, and I felt the quiet ache of her absence.

Around two in the morning, I wandered out to the balcony—the same balcony where every memory from the past seemed to find me. I sat down, lit up a cigarette, and as the smoke curled into the night, I found myself whispering, *“I’ll wait for her. I’ll wait till my lungs are filled with ashes.”*

But what was harder than waiting was—the endless loop of “what if,” replaying in my mind like an unbroken song. *If I could go back, would I have held on tighter? Would I have told her more often how much she meant?* Sometimes, the hardest thing to live with is knowing you did everything, yet still wondering if it was enough.

Then, my phone buzzed in my hand, jolting me back. An unknown number flashed on the screen, and my heart leaped—*Could it be her?*

I answered, holding my breath, only to hear a familiar voice on the other end. *“Hello,”* she said, softly. It was Avantika.

For a moment, I wondered if I should continue the conversation. Part of me hesitated, questioning if this connection was worth revisiting. But strangely, I felt a sense of calm; maybe I didn’t hold any grudges against her after all. The hurt had dulled, and while I hadn’t fully healed, I knew I didn’t hate her.

“Happy Birthday,” she said, her voice gentle, almost cautious.

“Thanks,” I replied, with a quiet smile she couldn’t see. It felt strange yet comforting, like finding an old photograph you’d forgotten existed.

There was a pause, then she asked, “How have you been? It’s... been a while.”

“Yeah, it has,” I replied, my voice steady. “Life’s been busy, I guess. Gotten used to some changes... you know how it is.”

She laughed softly, a sound I hadn't heard in ages. "Yeah, I do." Then, almost hesitantly, she said, "I'm sorry again. I should have been honest about things from the start."

"It's okay. I've moved on," I said, surprising myself with how true it felt. "I don't have anything left for you... not the way I used to."

She fell silent for a moment, then spoke, her words gentle but loaded. "Life moves fast, doesn't it? One day we're planning our future together and the next, we're strangers on the other end of a call."

I couldn't help but ask, "How's Mehul? The one you once hid from the world... and from me?"

There was a quiet sigh on the other end. "We're not in touch anymore."

I thought about asking why, but before I could, she added, "Maybe we all just play the roles we're meant to. Some people come into our lives to stay, and others... maybe they're just there to point us in the right direction. Honestly... I've learned a lot because of you and because of Mehul as well"

Her words hit harder than I expected, like an ache I thought I'd buried. I couldn't help but wonder if this was how it would end with Tanishka too. Just another story, another stranger I'd eventually let go. No... I didn't want that. I didn't want her to just be part of my past.

"Hey, are you there?" Avantika's voice snapped me back.

I cleared my throat, trying to steady myself. "Yeah, I'm here." Her words felt hauntingly true. "Maybe that's what strangers really are—guides in disguise, showing us parts of ourselves we couldn't see on our own." I replied

She paused, and then asked quietly, "And... How's Tanishka?"

I hesitated, unwilling to share too much. "She's... fine. Everything's fine."

"Take care, Avantika," I said, a finality in my tone but no bitterness.

"You too," she replied softly. "And hey... maybe one day, we'll cross paths again. Even as strangers."

As the call ended, a strange blend of closure and curiosity lingered. I stepped back inside, leaving the door open—a quiet invitation to the unknown, to whoever or whatever might step through.

As the night fell, I felt the weight of all the connections I'd held and lost. Life, I realized, was an endless cycle of arrivals and farewells, of meeting people who were both strangers and mirrors of what we seek.

And somewhere, in the midst of it all, there was Tanishka—a name, a memory, a question that lingered like an unfinished story.

Maybe this was the beginning of a new journey, one where every stranger held a piece of my past and a glimpse of my future, waiting to unfold.

Life has a way of leading us to where we need to be, even if it's with strangers.

"Strangers are just familiar souls who meet us at the crossroads of who we were and who we're meant to be."

The end.....

* * * * *

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With gratitude and love,
Shrijeet Shandilya

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writing this story was an exploration of the complex and beautiful layers of love and friendship, two forces that define, mold, and occasionally shatter us. With connections that appear unbreakable and love that seems to last forever, college is an intense time. But when those bonds are tested, we learn who we truly are and what we value most. I hope this book resonates with anyone who's struggled to balance friendship and love, and who's had to confront the painful but necessary art of letting go.

I hope it stays with you the way it stayed with me while writing it.

With gratitude and love,
Shrijeet Shandilya