

Ananya clutched the trinkets on her dupatta so they didn't make a noise as she spoke. 'Sir, that curve shows different bundles of goods between which a consumer is indifferent. That is, at each point on the curve, the consumer has equal preference for one bundle over another.'

'That's not my question. What is the mathematical formula?'

'I don't know that. In any case, this is only a concept.'

'But do you know it?'

'No. but I can't think of any real life situation where a mathematical formula like this would work,' Ananya said.

Prof raised his hand to interrupt her. 'Shsh....' He gave a sinister smile. 'Notice, class, notice. This is the state of economics education in our country. Top graduates don't know the basics. And then they ask – why is India economically backward?'

Prof emphatically dropped the chalk on his table to conclude his point. He had solved what had dumbfounded policymakers for decades. Ananya Swaminathan was the reason for India's backwardness.

Ananya hung her head in shame. A few IITians brightened up. Microeconomics was an elective course in IIT and those who had done it knew the formula. They were itching to show off.

'Anyone knows?' Prof asked and Ankur raised his hand.

'Yes, tell us. Ms Swaminathan, you should talk to your neighbours more. And next time, don't raise your hand if I ask for microeconomics graduates.' Prof said.

He went to the board to write lots of Greek symbols and calculus equations. The course started with cute little things like how many people choose between tea and biscuits. It had moved on to scary equations that would dominate exams. The class took mad notes. Kanyashree wrote so hard I could feel the seismic vibrations from her pen's nib.

I stole a glance at Ananya. As a smug Ankur saw his words inscribed on the board, Ananya's left hand's fingers scrunched up her yellow dupatta. She moved her left hand to her face even as she continued to write with her right. In subtle movements, she dabbed at her tears. Maybe Ms Best Girl had a heart, I thought. And maybe I should cut out my studied ignorance strategy and talk to her after class.

'You OK?' I said again.

She nodded while continuing to wipe her tears. She fixed her gaze down.

'I miss Topaz,' I said to change the topic.

'I've never been so humiliated,' she said.

'Nobody cares. All professors are assholes. That's the universal truth,' I

offered. 'At least where I come from.'

'You want to see my economics degree? I'll show you my grades.'

'No,' I said.

'I came third in the entire Delhi University. These wannabe engineer profs have turned economics from perfectly fine liberal arts subject to this Greek symbol junkyard,' she said as she pointed to the formulae on the board.

I kept silent.

'You are from IIT. You probably love these equations,' she said and looked up at me. Despite her tears, she still looked pretty.

I looked at the blackboard. Yes, I did have a fondness for algebra. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Yet, this wasn't the time. 'No, I am not a big fan. Greek symbols do take the fun out of any subject.'

'Exactly, but these profs don't think so. They will have these equations in the test next week. I am going to flunk. And he is going to turn me into this specimen of the educated but clueless Indian student. I bet I am the staff-room discussion right now.'

'They are all frustrated,' I said. 'we are half their age but will earn twice as them in two years. Wouldn't you hate an eleven-year-old if he earned double?'

She smiled.

'You need to hang that dupatta out to dry,' I said. She smiled some more.

We walked out of the class. We decided to skip lunch and have tea and omelette at the roadside Rambhai outside campus.

'He is going to screw me in microeconomics. He's probably circled my name and put a D in front of it already,' she said, nestling the hot glass of tea in her dupatta folds for insulation.

'Don't freak out. Listen, you can study with me. I don't like these equations, but I am good at them. That's all we did at IIT for four years.'

She looked at me for a few seconds.

'Hey, I have no interest in being number eleven. This is purely for study reasons.'

She laughed. 'Actually, the score is thirteen now.'

'IITians?'

'No, this time from NIT. They are catching up.'

'I know, we are losing our edge. Whatever, I don't want to be number fourteen. I thought I could teach you.....'

She interrupted me, 'I can't learn economics from you. I am a university topper in economics. You are an engineer.'

'Then good luck,' I said and stood up to pay.

'I didn't say that. I said you can't teach me. But we can study together.'

I looked at her. She looked nice, and I couldn't blame the thirteen guys for trying.

'My room at eight? Ever been to the girl's dorm?'

'There is a first time for everything,' I said.

'Cool, carry lots of books to make it clear what you are there for,' Ananya advised.

3

I reached the girl's dorm at 8 p.m. I carried the week's case materials, the size of six telephone directories. I knocked at her door.

'One second, I am changing,' her muffled scream came from inside.

After three hundred seconds, she opened the door. She wore a red and white tracksuit. 'Sorry,' she said as she tied up her hair in a bun. 'Come in. We'd better start, there is so much to do.'

She gave me her study chair and sat on her bed. The rust-coloured bed-sheet matched the exposed brick walls. She had made a notice board out of chart paper and stuck family pictures all over.

'See, that's my family. That's my dad. He is so cute,' she said.

I looked carefully. A middle-aged man with neatly combed hair rationed his grin. He wore a half-sleeve shirt with a dhoti in most of the pictures. He looked like the neighbor who stops you from playing loud music. No, nothing cute about him. I scanned the remaining pictures taken on festivals, weddings and birthdays. In one, Ananya's whole family stood to attention at the beach. You could almost hear the national anthem.

'That's Marina Beach in Chennai. Do you know it is the second largest city beach in the world?'

I saw her brother, around fourteen years of age. The oiled hair, geeky face and spectacles made him look like an IITian embryo. His lack of interest in the world expression told me he would make it.

'And that's mom?' I quizzed. Ananya nodded.

Ananya's brother and father still seemed mild compared to her mother. Even in pictures she had a glum expression that made you wonder what did you do wrong. She reminded me of the strictest teachers I ever had in school. I immediately felt guilty about being in her daughter's room. My hands tingled as I almost expected her to jump out of the picture and slap me with a ruler.

'Mom and I,' Ananya said as she kneeled on the bed and sighed.

‘What?’ I looked at a wedding picture of her relatives. Given the dusky complexion, everyone’s teeth shone extra white. All old women wore as much gold as their bodies could carry and silk saris shiny as road reflectors.

‘Nothing, I wish I got along better with her,’ Ananya said. ‘Hey, you have pictures of your family?’

I shook my head. My family was too disorganized to ever pause and pose at the right moment. I don’t think we even had a camera.

‘Who is there in your family?’ She sifted through the case materials to take out the economics notes.

‘Mom, dad and me. That’s it,’ I said.

‘Tell me more. What do they do? Who are you close to?’

‘We met to study,’ I pointed out and pated the microeconomics booklet.

“Of course, we will. I only asked to make conversation. Don’t tell me if you don’t want to,” she said and batted her eyelids. *How can such scary looking parents create something so cute?*

‘OK, I’ll answer. But after that, we study. No gossip for an hour,’ I warned.

‘Sure, I already have my book open,’ she said and sat on the bed cross-legged.

‘OK, my mother is a housewife. I am close to her, but not hugely close. That reminds me, I have to call her. I’ll go to the STD booth later.’

‘And dad? I am super close to mine.’

‘Let’s study,’ I said and opened the books.

‘You aren’t close to your father?’

‘You want to flunk?’

‘Shsh,’ she agreed and covered her lips with a finger. We studied for the next two hours in silence. She would look up sometimes and do pointless things like changing her pillow cover or re-adjusting her study lamp. I ignored all that. I had wasted enough of my initial years at IIT. Most likely due to a CAT computation error, I had another chance at IIMA. I wanted to make it count.

‘Wow, you can really concentrate,’ she said after an hour. ‘it’s ten. STD calls are cheap now.’