

plate.

I passed my katori to her. She took the two rasgullas and moved out of the line.

OK buddy, pretty girl goes her way, rasgulla-less loser goes another. Find a corner to sit, I said to myself.

She turned to me. She didn't ask me to sit with her, but she looked like she wouldn't mind if I did. She pointed to a table with a little finger where we sat down opposite each other. The entire mess stared at us, wondering what I had done to merit sitting with her. I have made a huge sacrifice - my dessert - I wanted to tell them.

'I'm Krish,' I said, doodling in the sambhar with my spoon.

'I'm Ananya. Yuk isn't it?' she said as I grimaced at the food's taste.

'I'm used to hostel food,' I shrugged. 'I've had worse.'

'Hard to imagine worse,' she said.

I coughed as I bit on a green chili. She had a water jug next to her. She lifted the jug, leaned forward and poured water for me. A collective sigh ran through the mess. We had become everyone's matinee show.

She finished her two desserts in four bites. 'I'm still hungry. I didn't even have breakfast.'

'Hunger or tasteless food, hostel life is about whatever is easier to deal with,' I said.

'You want to go out? I'm sure the city has decent restaurants,' she said.

'Now?' We had a class in one hour. But Ms Best Girl had asked me out, even though for her own stomach. And as everyone knows, female classmates always come before class.

'Don't tell me you are dying to attend the lecture,' she said and stood up, daring me.

I spooned in some rice.

She stamped her foot. 'Leave that disgusting stuff.'

Four hundred eyes followed us as I walked out of the mess with Ms Ananya Swaminathan, rated the best girl by popular vote in IIMA.

'Do you like chicken?' The menu rested on her nose as she spoke. We had

come to Topaz, a basic, soulless but air-conditioned restaurant half a kilometer from campus. Like all mid-range Indian restaurants, it played boring instrumental versions of old Hindi songs and served little marinated onions on the table.

‘I thought Ahmedabad was vegetarian,’ I said.

‘Please, I’d die here then.’ She turned to the waiter and ordered half a tandoori chicken with roomali rotis.

‘Do you have beer?’ she asked the waiter.

The waiter shook his head in horror and left.

‘We are in Gujarat, there is prohibition here,’ I said.

‘Why?’

‘Gandhiji’s birthplace,’ I said

‘But Gandhiji won us freedom,’ she said, playing with the little onions. ‘What’s the point of getting people free only to put restrictions on them?’

‘Point,’ I said. ‘So, you are an expert on rasam and sambhar. Are you a South Indian?’

‘Tamilian, please be precise. In fact, Tamil Brahmin, which is way different from Tamilians. Never forget that.’ She leaned back as the waiter served our meal. She tore a chicken leg with her teeth.

‘And how exactly are Tamil Brahmins different?’

‘Well, for one thing, no meat and no drinking,’ she said as she gestured a cross with the chicken leg.

‘Absolutely,’ I said.

She laughed. ‘I didn’t say I am a practising Tam Brahmin. But you should know that I am born into the purest of pure upper caste communities ever created. What about you, commoner?’

‘I am a Punjabi, though I never lived in Punjab. I grew up in Delhi. And I have no idea about my caste, but we do eat chicken. And I can digest bad sambhar better than Tamil Brahmins,’ I said.

‘You are funny,’ she said, tapping my hand. I liked the tap.

‘So where did you stay in hostel before?’ she said. ‘Please don’t say IIT, you are doing pretty well so far.’

‘What’s wrong with IIT?’

‘Nothing, are you from there?’ She sipped water.

‘Yes, from IIT Delhi. Is that a problem?’

‘No,’ she smiled, ‘not yet.’

'Excuse me?' I said. Her smugness had reached irritating levels.

'Nothing,' she said.

We stayed quiet.

'What's the deal? Someone from IIT broke your heart?'

She laughed. 'No, on the contrary. I seem to have broken some, for no fault of my own.'

'Care to explain?'

'Don't tell anyone, but in the past one week that I've been here, I've had ten proposals. All from IITians.'

I mentally kicked myself. My guess was right; she was getting a lot of attention. I only wished it wasn't from my own people.

'Proposals for what?'

'The usual, to go out, be friends and stuff. Oh, and one guy from IIT Chennai proposed marriage!'

'Serious?'

'Yes, he said this past week has been momentous for him. He joined IIMA, and now he has found his wife in me. I may be wrong, but I think he had some jewellery on him.'

I smacked my forehead. No, my collegemates can't be doing this, whatever the deprivation.

'So, you understand my concern about you being from IIT,' she said, picking up a chicken breast next.

'Oh, so it is a natural reaction. If I am from IIT, I have to propose to you within ten minutes?'

'I didn't say that.'

'You implied that.'

'I'm sorry.'

'It's OK. I expected you to be like this. Let me guess- only child, rich parents?'

'Wrong, wrong. I have a younger brother. And my father works in Bank of Baroda in Chennai. Sorry, you expected me to be like what?'

'Some girls cannot handle attention. Two days of popularity and every guy in college should bow to you.'

'That's not true. Didn't I come out with you?' She neatly transferred the bare bones of the chicken on to another plate.

‘Oh, that’s huge. Coming out with a commoner like me. How much is the bill? I’ll pay my share and leave.’ I stood up.

‘Hey,’ she said.

‘What?’

‘I’m sorry. Please sit down.’

I had lost interest in the conversation anyway. If there is nothing as attractive as a pretty girl, there’s nothing as repulsive as a cocky chick.

I sat back and focused on the food and the irritating instrumental music for the next ten minutes. I ignored the Brahmin who stereotyped my collegemates.

‘Are we OK now?’ she smiled hesitantly.

‘Why did you come out with me? To take your score to eleven?’

‘You really want to know?’

‘Yes.’

‘I need some friends here. And you seemed like a safe-zone guy. Like the kind of guy who could just be friends with a girl, right?’

Absolutely not, I thought. ***Why would any guy want to be only friends with a girl? It’s like agreeing to be near a chocolate cake and never eat it. It’s like sitting in a racing car but not driving it. Only wimps do that.***

‘I’m not so sure,’ I said.

‘You can handle it. I told you about the proposals because you can see how stupid they are.’

‘They are not stupid. They are IITians. They just don’t know how to talk to women yet,’ I said.

‘Whatever. But you do. And I’d like to be friends with you. Just friends, OK?’ She extended her hand. I gave her a limp handshake.

‘Let’s share, sixty each,’ she said as the bill arrived.

That’s right, ‘just friends’ share bills. I didn’t want to be just friends with her. And I didn’t want to be the eleventh martyr.

I paid my share and came back to campus. I had no interest in meeting my just friend anytime again soon.

2

‘You OK?’ I said going up to my just friend. She remained in her seat as her tears re-emerged. The last lecture had ended and the classroom was empty.

I hadn’t spoken much to Ananya after our lunch last week. Pretty girls behave best when you ignore them. (Of course, they have to know you are ignoring them, for otherwise they may not even know you exist.)

But today I had to talk to her. She had cried in the class. We had auditorium-style classrooms with semi-circular rows, so everyone could see everyone. Students sat in alphabetical order. Ananya, like all kids doomed with names starting with the letter A, sat in the first row on the left side. She sat between Ankur and Aditya, both IITians who had already proposed to her without considering the embarrassment of being rejected and then sitting next to the rejection for the whole year.

I sat in the third row, between Kanyashree, who took notes like a diligent court transcriber, and five Mohits, who had come from different parts of India. But neither Ankur, nor Kanyashree, nor the five Mohits had noticed Ananya’s tears. Only I had caught her wiping her eye with a yellow dupatta that had little bells at its ends that tinkled whenever she moved.

In the past week, I had limited my communication with Ananya to cursory greetings every morning and a casual wave at the end of the day. During classes we had to pay attention to the teachers we had marks for class participation-saying something that sounds intelligent. Most IITians never spoke while people from non-science backgrounds spoke non-stop.

Twenty-three minutes into the microeconomics class, the professor drew an L-shaped utility curve on the blackboard. He admired his curve for ten seconds and then turned to the class.

‘How many economics graduates here?’ asked Prof Chatterjee, a two-decade IIMA veteran.

Fifteen students out of the seventy students in section A raised their hands, Ananya included.

Chatterjee turned to her. ‘You recognise the curve, Ms Swaminathan?’ He read her name from the nameplate in front.

‘The basic marginal utility curve, sir,’ Ananya said.

‘So, Ms Swaminathan, how would you represent that curve mathematically?’

Ananya stood up, her eyes explaining clearly that she had no clue. The remaining fourteen economics graduates lowered their hands.

‘Yes, Ms Swaminathan?’ Chatterjee said.

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.’