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ACT 1: Ahmedabad

She stood two places ahead of me in the lunch line at the IIMA mess. I checked her out from the corner of my eye, wondering what the big fuss about this South Indian girl was.

Her waist-length hair rippled as she tapped the steel plate with her fingers like a famished refugee. I noticed three black threads on the back of her fair neck. Someone had decided to accessorize in the most academically-oriented B-school in the country.

'Ananya Swaminathan---best girl in the fresher batch,' seniors has already anointed her on the dorm board. We had only twenty girls in a batch of two hundred. Good-looking ones were rare; girls don't get selected to IIM for their looks. They get in because they can solve mathematical problems faster than 99.99% of India's population and crack the CAT. Most IIM girls are above shallow things like make-up, fitting clothes, contact lenses, removal of facial hair, body odour and feminine charm. Girls like Ananya, if and when they arrive by freak chance, become instant pin-ups in out testosterone-charged, estrogen-starved campus.

I imagined Ms Swaminathan had received more male attention in the last week than she had in her entire life. Thus, I assumed she'd be obnoxious and decided to ignore her.

The students inched forward on auto-pilot. The bored kitchen staff couldn't care if they were serving prisoners or future CEOs. They tossed one ladle of yellow stuff after another into plates. Of course, Ms Best Girl needed the spotlight.

'That's not rasam. Whatever it is, it's definitely not rasam. And what's that, the dark yellow stuff?'

'Sambhar,' the mess worker growled.

'Eew, looks disgusting! How did you make it?' she asked.

'You want or not?' the mess worker said, more interested in wrapping up lunch than discussing recipes.

While our lady decided, the two boys between us banged their plates on the counter. They took the food without editorials about it and left. I came up right behind her. I stole a sideways glance - ***definitely above average. Actually, well above average. In fact, outlier by IIMA standards.*** She had perfect features, with eyes, nose, lips and ears the right size and in the right places. That is all it takes to make people beautiful- normal body parts - yet why does nature mess is up so many times? Her tiny blue bindi matched her sky- blue and white slawar kameez. She looked like Sridevi's smarter cousin, if there is such a possibility.

The mess worker dumped a yellow lump on my plate.

'Excuse me, I'm before him,' she said to the mess worker, pinning him down with her large, confident eyes.

'What you want?' the mess worker said in a heavy South Indian accent. 'You calling rasam not rasam. You make face when you see my sambhar. I feed hundred people. They no complain.'

'And that is why you don't improve. Maybe they should complain,' she said.

The mess worker dropped the ladle in the sambhar vessel and threw up his hands. 'You want complain? Go to mess manager and complain....see what student coming to these days,' the mess worker turned to me seeking sympathy.

I almost nodded.

She looked at me. 'Can you eat this stuff?' she wanted to know. 'Try it.'

I took a spoonful of sambhar. Warm and salty, not gourmet stuff, but edible in a no-choice kind of way. I could eat it for lunch; I had stayed in a hostel for four years.

However, I saw her face, now prettier with a hint of pink. I compared her to the fifty-year old mess worker. He wore a lungi and had visible grey hair on his chest. When in doubt, the pretty girl is always right.

'It's disgusting,' I said.

'See,' she said with childlike glee.

The mess worker glared at me.

'But I can develop a taste for it,' I added in a lame attempt to soothe him.

The mess worker grunted and tossed a mound of rice on my plate.

'Pick something you like,' I said to her, avoiding eye contact. The whole campus had stared at her in the past few days. I had to appear different.

'Give me the rasgullas,' she pointed to the dessert.

'That is after you finish meal,' the mess worker said.

'Who are you? My Mother? I am finished. Give me two rasgullas,' she insisted.

'Only one per student,' he said as he placed a katori with one sweet on her plate.

'Oh, come on, there are no limits on this disgusting sambhar but only one of what is edible,' she said. The line grew behind us. The boys in line didn't mind. They had a chance to legitimately stare at the best-looking girl of the batch.

'Give mine to her,' I said and regretted it immediately. *She'll never date you, it is a rasgulla down the drain*, I scolded myself.

'I give to you,' the mess worker said virtuously as he placed the dessert on my

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.’

'Oh yes, I better go,' I said.

'I'll come with you. I'll call home too,' she said and skipped off the bed to wear her slippers.

'Seri, seri, seri Amma.....Seri!' she said, each seri increasing in pitch, volume and frustration. She had called home. Many students had lined up to make cheap calls at the STD booth, a five-minute walk from campus. Most carried their microeconomics notes. I helped Ananya with small change after her call.

'Is he dating her?' I overheard a student whisper to another.

'I don't think so, she treats him like a brother,' his friend guffawed.

I ignored the comment and went into the booth.

'Every girl wants an IIT brother, big help in quant subjects,' the first student said as several people around them laughed.

I controlled my urge to snap back at them and dialed home.

'Hello?' my father's voice came after four rings.

I kept silent. The meter started to click.

'Hello? Hello?' my father continued to speak.

I kept the phone down. The printer churned out the bill.

'Missed connection, you have to pay,' the shopkeeper said.

I nodded and dialed again. This time my mother picked up.

'Mom,' I screamed. 'I told you to be near the phone after ten.'

'I'm sorry. I was in the kitchen. He wanted to talk to you, so he picked up. Say hello to him first and then ask him for me.'

'I'm not interested.'

'OK, leave that. How are you doing? How is the place?'

'It's fine. But they make you cram even more than in the previous college.'

'How is the food?'

'Terrible. I am in a hostel. What do you expect?'

'I'm going to send some pickle.'

'The city has good restaurants.'

'They have chicken?' she asked, her voice worried as if she had asked about basic amenities like power and water.

'In a few places.'

'FMS was good enough. I don't know why you had to leave Delhi.'

'Mom, I am not going to make my career choices based on the availability of chicken,' I said and looked at the meter. I had spent eighteen bucks. "I'll hang up now.'

'Tell me something more no. did you make any friends?'

'Not really, sort of....' I looked at Ananya's face outside the booth. She looked at me and smiled.

'Who? What's their name?'

'An...Anant.'

'Punjabi?'

'Mom!'

'I'm sorry. I just thought you could have a friend who likes the same food. Its OK. We are very modern. Don't you know?'

'Yeah right. I'll catch you later. I have a test tomorrow.'

'Oh, really? Pray before the exam, OK?'

'Sure, let me finish studying first.'

I hung up and paid twenty-five bucks.

'Why did you hang up the first time? Your dad picked, right?' Ananya asked as we walked back.

I stopped in my tracks. 'How do you know?'

'I guessed. I do it with mom when I'm angry with her. We don't hang up; we just stay on the line and keep silent.'

'And pay?'

'Yes. Pretty expensive way to let each other know we are upset. Only sometimes though.'

'I never speak to my father,' I said.

'Why?' Ananya looked at me.

'Long story. Not for tonight. Or any night. I'd like to keep it to myself.'

'Sure,' she said.

We walked for a moment in silence before she spoke again. 'So your parents have big expectations from you? Which job are you going to take? Finance? Marketing? IT?'

'Neither of those,' I said. 'Though i will take up a job for the money first.'

'So what do you want to be? Like really?' She looked right into my eyes.

I couldn't lie. 'I want to be a writer?' I said.

I expected her to flip out and laugh. But she didn't. She nodded and continued to walk. 'What kind of writer?' she said.

'Someone who tells stories that are fun but bring about change too. The pen's mightier than the sword, one of the first proverbs we learnt, isn't it?'

She nodded.

'Sounds ridiculous?'

'No, not really,' she said.

'How about you? What do you want to be?'

She laughed. 'Well, I don't know. My mother already feels I'm too ambitious and independent. So I am trying not to think too far. As of now, I just want to do

OK in my quiz and make my mother happy. Both are incredibly difficult though,' she said.

We reached her room and practised numerical for the next two hours.

'I am so glad you are here. I'd never be able to crack these,' she said after I solved a tricky one for her.

'You are not using me, are you?'

'Excuse me?'

'Like you are friends with me because I am from IIT? So I can help you with the quant subjects.'

'Are you kidding me?' she looked shocked.

'I don't want to be the IIT brother,' I said.

'What? Whatever that is, you are not. We are friends, right?'

She extended her hand. I looked into her eyes. No, those eyes couldn't use anyone.

'Good night,' I said and shook her hand.

'Hey Krish,' she said as I turned to leave.

'What?'

'The stuff you said, about being a writer who brings about change. It is really cool. I mean it,' she said.

I smiled.

'Good night,' she said and shut her door. A few sleepless girls wandered in the dorm with their notes. They gave me suspicious looks.

'I only came to study,' I said and walked out of the dorm fast. I don't know why I felt the need to give an explanation.

4

She came out of the research assistant's room with her microeconomics quiz results. She walked past the queued up students toward me. By this time, everyone on campus knew of her friendship, or as someone would say, siblingship, with me. She wore denim shorts and a pink T-shirt, drawing extra long glances from the boys from engineering colleges.

'B-plus, people say it is a good grade,' she said, holding up her answer sheet.

'Your shorts are too short,' I said.

'Show me your grade,' she said, snatching my paper. 'A minus, wow, you cracked an A-minus!'

I didn't react. We walked back towards our dorms.

'You cannot score more than me in economics, I don't believe this,' she said. 'You are a mechanical engineer. I am a university gold medalist in the subject.'

'Show the medal to Prof Chatterjee,' I said in a serious tone.

'Hey, you OK?'

I kept quiet.

'Anyway, I owe you a treat. Your numerical saved me. Are you hungry?'

I nodded. People who live in hostels are always hungry.

'Let's go to Rambhai,' she said.

'You are not coming to Rambhai like this,' I said.

'Like what?'

'Like in these shorts,' I said.

'Excuse me. Is it a Delhi thing or a Punjabi thing? Controlling what women wear?'

'It is a common sense thing. It is outside campus. People stare,' I said.

‘Enough people stare within campus. I’m fine, let’s go,’ she said and walked towards the campus gates.

‘I don’t need a treat. It’s fine,’ I said, turning in the opposite direction towards my dorm.

‘Are you serious? You are not coming?’ she called from behind.

I shook my head.

‘Up to you.’

I ignored her and continued to walk.

‘Are you going to come for the study session tonight?’

I shrugged to signify ‘whatever’.

‘Any dress code for me?’ she said.

‘You are not my girlfriend. Wear whatever. What do I care?’ I said.

We didn’t talk about the afternoon episode when I came to her room in the evening. She had changed into black track pants and an oversized full-sleeve black T-shirt. She was covered up enough to go for a walk in Afghanistan. I kind of missed her shorts, but I had brought it upon myself. I opened the marketing case that we had to prepare for the next day.

‘Nirdosh – nicotine-free-cigarettes,’ I read out the title.

‘Who the fuck wants that? I feel like a real smoke,’ she said. I gave her a dirty look.

‘What? Am I not allowed to use the F words? Or is it that I expressed a desire to smoke?’

‘What are you trying to prove?’

'Nothing. I want you to consider the possibility that women are intelligent human beings. And intelligent people don't like to be told what to wear or do, especially when they are adults. Does that make any sense to you?'

'Don't be over-smart,' I said.

'Don't patronize me,' she said.

'There are other ways to attract attention than by wearing less clothes,' I said.

'I didn't do it to attract attention. I wear shorts because I like to wear shorts.'

'Can we study?' I opened the case again.

We kept quiet for half an hour and immersed ourselves in our books.

'I wasn't trying to attract attention,' she said again, looking up from her books.

'It doesn't matter to me,' I said.

'Are you jealous?'

'Are you kidding me?' I slammed my book shut.

'No, just checking. Let's study.' She turned back to her books, a smile on her face.

I threw the pillow at her. She laughed and slammed it on my head. I realised this was the first contact sport I had played with her apart from shaking hands.

5

We studied together every day for the next month. Even though I pretended to be fine with the 'just friends' thing, it was killing me. Every time I looked up from my books, I saw her face. Every time I saw her, I wanted to grab her face and kiss her. The only way I could focus was by imagining that Prof Chatterjee was in our room.

Even outside the study sessions, it wasn't easy. Every time I saw a guy talk to her or laugh with her, a hot flush started from my stomach and reached my face. Sometimes, she would tell me how funny some guy in section A was or how cute some guy in section B was and I wanted to go with a machine gun and shoot the respective guys in sections A and B.

'What? They should go full on with the advertising campaign, right?' she referred to the marketing case.

I had been staring at her lips, researching ways of kissing her. 'Huh? Yes, I agree with you,' I said.

'Your mind is elsewhere. What are you thinking of right now?' she snapped her fingers.

'Nothing, sorry, I was thinking how.....how insightful you are in marketing.'

'Thank you,' she smiled, believing me. 'Yes, I like this subject. I think I will be good at a marketing job. So I will go with this recommendation tomorrow.'

We finished the case at midnight. I stood up to leave.

'Tea?' she said, suggesting we go to Rambhai.

'No. I can't fall asleep then,' I said.

'Maggi? I will make it in the pantry upstairs.'

'No, I'd better go,'

She came to the door with me. 'You are so serious these days. What do you keep thinking about? Grades?'

'I can't study with you any longer,' I blurted out.

'What?' she said surprised.

'We've figured out a rhythm for ourselves. We don't need to study together anymore.'

'Yeah, but we like to study together, at least I do....What's up? Did I do anything wrong?'

'It's not you. It's me,' I said.

'Don't do an "it's not you, it's me" on me,' Ananya screamed.

Her loud voice woke up a girl in the next room who switched on her light.

'We are not dating, OK? Stop behaving like we are having a break-up,' I whispered. 'And go to sleep. There's a quiz tomorrow.'

I didn't speak to her in the class the next day. She came up to me twice, once to return my pen that I had left in her room and another time during the mid-morning break to ask me if I wanted to go for tea. Once you start liking someone, their mere presence evokes a warm feeling in you. I fought the feeling before it took control of me.

'I'd rather read up for the next class. You go have tea,' I said.

She didn't insist as she left the room. She had worn a long maroon skirt and a light brown top. I wish she'd turn back and look at me. But she didn't. she joined her dorm-mates and went out for tea.

I dodged her for the next five days. I came late to class and left first so there was no time for greetings.

'You are not talking to her?' the Mohit right next to me asked while the other four craned their necks to listen. Even Kanyashree paused from her frantic note-taking and turned her profile ten-degrees towards me.

'You seem quite concerned?' I said and everyone promptly backed off.

6

Ananya knocked at my door at nine in the night. I had just sat down to study after dinner. Girls rarely visited boys' dorms. She had come to my room only once before. It had excited my dorm-mates into an impromptu Frisbee match set to loud music in the dorm corridor.

'She reminds me of Bhagyashree,' one of the boys had screamed outside our room. Even I couldn't resist a smile. He went on to play a song from *Maine Pyar Kiya* that urged a pigeon to play postman.

'That's it. We are never studying at your dorm again,' she had fumed as she packed her books. She opened the door to eight boys playing Frisbee in the corridor.

'For the record, I Hate Bhagyashree,' she had said and stormed off.

But here she was again. And the firmness in her step meant my dorm-mates didn't act like Neanderthals and had disappeared into their rooms.

I opened the door. She stood there, wearing the blue and white salwar kameez that she wore the first time I saw her. When you are in campus, you can figure out a pattern in people's clothes. Her blue salwar kameez repeated itself every three weeks.

She had brought two Frootis with her. 'Can I come in? Can I distract the scholar for ten minutes from his studies?'

Unlike her room, there was no aesthetic appeal to mine. I had left the red bricks bare, and they looked like prison walls. My originally white bed-sheet had turned grey after being washed in acid in the IIT hostels. My desk only had books, unlike Ananya's who always had cut flowers from campus lawns or arty incense holders or other objects that men never put on their shopping lists.

'Wait,' is aid. I turned around to do a quick scan. No, there was no underwear or smelly socks or porn magazines or old razor blades in sight. I held the door open.

'Mugging away?' she asked as she sat on the bed.

'No choice.' I pulled back my study chair.

'Your grades will improve as you don't study with me anymore.'

'It's nothing like that,' I said.

'Then, what is the matter? What is this childish behavior? Like you don't even acknowledge me in class.'

I looked away from her.

'Eye contact please.'

I looked at her. I had missed her so much I wanted to lock my room and never let her go.

'I can't,' I said.

'Can't what?'

'I can't be just friends. I'm sure some guys can be friends with girls. I can't. Not with you.'

'What?' She sat up straight.

'I know you are out of my league and I don't deserve you and whatever so spare me all that and....'

'What are you talking about?' she sounded confused.

'Forget it. Thanks for the Frooti,' I said. I took a long, gurgling sip to finish the drink. I slammed the tetrapack on the table like a retro Hindi film hero who takes the last sip of his VAT69. Yes, leave me alone as I drown my suffering in mango juice, I thought.

'Hey.' She touched my shoulder.

'Don't put your hand on my shoulder,' I said as her touch sent tingles down the back of my neck.

'OK, peace.' She moved her hand away. 'But this is sort of not fair. We had a deal.'

'Screw the deal,' I said as I crumpled the Frooti carton and threw it in my dustbin.

We exchanged glances, silent for a minute.

'What do you want?' she asked.

‘I want us to be a couple,’ I said. ‘And this is not a proposal. I am not Mr. Fourteen.’

She stared at me. I stared back, to show I was unfazed. ‘If this isn’t a proposal, what is it?’

‘**You** have come to my room. **You** asked me what I want. It’s different.’

‘But **you** want us to be a couple.’ Her voice was still defiant.

I nodded.

‘We used to practically be a couple, studying together, going to the STD booth together, having meals in the mess together.’

‘All that stuff you can do with anyone,’ I said.

‘You aren’t making any sense,’ she said.

‘OK, I will explain it,’ I said and stood up. ‘I will explain it so it makes sense. To sit and study with you is an exercise in double self-control. First I have to force myself to pay attention to these boring cases. Second, I have to avoid looking at your face as much as possible because when I look at your face, all I want to do is kiss you. But we have this stupid just-friends deal and you are all cool about it and so that leaves me whipping my mind to study nicotine-free cigarettes and not think about your lips and the little mole that is there below the lower one.’

‘You noticed that mole? It’s tiny.’ She touched it.

‘It may be tiny, but it at least has a fifty percent market share in terms of my mind-space. But hey, I am just a friend. I don’t get the mole. I only get the full stops.’

She laughed.

‘I am not being funny. You girls don’t know what it is like to be a guy.’

‘Those lips talk a lot. Yours I mean,’ she said.

I froze. Ms Swaminathan didn’t as she came close to me. In a second, her Frooti-laced lips were on mine. We kissed for three seconds.

‘And now, before I realize the stupidity of what I have done, I am out of here,’ she said and opened the door. I was too dumbstruck to move.

Four boys from my dorm removed their ears from the door as Ananya pushed the door open.

‘We were just locating our Frisbee,’ one of the four boys said.

‘It won’t be in this room. This boy only likes to study,; she said and walked out of my dorm.

I didn’t move an inch for five minutes. The remaining three minutes were spent realizing that the hottest girl in the campus had kissed me. I didn’t know what I’d done right. But I didn’t care. Maybe she had missed me too. Maybe it wasn’t such a big deal for her. Maybe I was just imagining this and this hadn’t really happened. Maybe I should stop dreaming like an idiot and run to her room. Maybe I shouldn’t, as I had no idea what to do when I meet her. Maybe I should let a night pass and talk to her in class tomorrow.

‘Don’t keep mentioning it,’ she said as the same lips that were on mine thirteen hours and twenty-two minutes ago sipped tea during class break.

‘Yes, sure, OK....’ I had already thanked her seven times. I changed the topic. ‘The normal distribution is totally overrated,’ I said, referring to the statistics class we had attended.

‘And don’t expect more,’ Ananya said.

‘More what?’ I said. She had brought the topic back now.

‘More meaning not anymore. Now, just back to what you said about the normal curve,’ she said.

‘Sorry, only one clarification. By more you mean no more kisses or no more than kissing?’

‘Can you stop it? We are in the middle of a class.’

‘But I am in the middle of a life crisis. Please tell me.’

'Is that all you guys think about? We have to study all these normal curve problems tonight.'

I looked at her and smiled.

'Any jokes about curves and I will kill you,' she promised as the bell rang for class.

7

Needless to say, one thing led to another and within two weeks we had sex. You put a boy and girl in a room for a week and lots of boring books, and sparks are sure to fly.

‘This is my first time,’ she said after we did it and pointed to her mother’s picture on the wall. ‘And if she finds out, she will flip.’

‘We should cover these pictures when we do it. They freak me out,’ I said, scanning her family members.

She laughed. ‘Was this your first time?’

‘I’d rather not talk about it,’ I said.

‘Did you have a girlfriend in IIT?’ She sat up to wear her top.

I kept quiet.

‘Did you have sex with a guy?’ Ananya asked eyebrows up.

‘No,’ I screamed and sat up. ‘Are you stupid? You, of all people, are asking me if I am gay.’

‘I heard they make you do all sorts of stuff in ragging.’

‘No, it wasn’t that bad. I had a girlfriend.’

‘Really?’ She blinked. ‘How come you never told me!’

‘I don’t want to talk about it. It’s over. It ended when I left college, two years ago.’

‘Why? Who was she? A student?’

‘Prof’s daughter.’

‘My, my, my! We have a stud here.’ Then, ‘Pretty? Prettier than me?’

I looked at Ananya. Why do women size each other up in looks so much?

‘Similar, though you are much smarter,’ I said.

‘Similar?’

‘OK, you are better looking,’ I said. The girl who asks the question is the better looking one, always.

‘Thank you,’ she said as she stepped off the bed to wear her track pants. ‘Why did it end?’

‘I sort of had a deal with her father.’

‘Father? What, he bought you out? Gave you a blank cheque like in films?’ she laughed.

‘No, he let me have my degree on time. Because of which I am here. But the implicit deal was, don’t push it. Don’t dream of being family. There was no future, so it died.’

My throat closed up as I thought about my previous girlfriend. Somehow, it never really gets over with an ex. You merely learn to push their thoughts aside. Unless someone prods your brain again to think of them. ‘Can we leave it now?’

‘Where is she now? Campus?’

‘No, father went to the US to a senior faculty post in MIT. She found a geeky guy of the same community. Engaged in six months, married in a year. Rest I don’t know. Now, even though we were naked a few moments ago, I do think I can make a case for invasion of privacy.’

‘Well, it affects me. In case you are still involved with her.’

‘I’m not. It took me a long time to get over her, but I am not involved anymore.’

‘Did you love her?’

‘Yes. And I feel sick I didn’t have the courage to fight her father. And no more talk about her please,’ I said. My ex-girlfriend and my father were off-limit topics.

‘One last question. Is she South Indian?’

‘How do you know?’

‘You mentioned IIT, MIT, geeky software programmer, it wasn’t that hard.’

I laughed.

‘My parents are pretty conservative too,’ she said, switching on her electric kettle.

‘We haven’t planned to get married yet.’

She stared at me. I wondered if I had said the wrong thing. I was being factual.

'You are right. We are just friends with benefits, right? Or what is it? Fuck buddies?'

She looked upset. It is amazing how the vulnerability in a relationship shifts from the guy to the girl after you've had sex.

'Hey, we.....'

But she interrupted me. 'Sorry, I am freaking out. Have tea.' She passed me a cup. I twiddled with the handle for two minutes. Despite the sexual possibilities, we still had to study.

'Should we open the HR case? It is about a strike in a hotel,' I said as I opened my folder.

She nodded without eye contact. I racked my brain hard on what I could say that could make her feel better. 'I love you,' I said.

She carefully closed her case materials and looked up at me. 'Mean it? She said, her eyes wet.

'Yes,' I said.

'You are not just saying it so you can have sex with me again?'

'No. but are you saying that....'

'I am not saying anything. Is that all you think about?'

'We study together, eat together, go out together, sit in class looking at each other all day, the only time we are apart is when I have to go to sleep or when I have to use the toilet. So,' I paused.

'So what?'

'I love you damn it! Don't you get it?' I yelled.

'That's better. Now you sound convincing.' She smiled.

'And you?' I asked.

'I'm going to think about it.'

'Excuse me?'

'Well, I could be only using you for sex,' she said.

'Excuse me?' I said, this time louder.

She laughed. I threw a pillow at her.

'I told you. I have to think about it.'

Even though she never said 'I love you', Ms Swaminathan moved in with me. I had freaked out about the idea when she arrived at my room one day with a backpack for overnight clothes. I'd have much preferred her place, as I didn't want her to be the only woman in the dorm with twenty testosterone-charged men.

Still, it was kind of nice. She brought her electric kettle, sweet smile and magic-making abilities with her. While we used to study together earlier, now there was even more discipline. When a woman comes into your life, things organize themselves.

We woke up in the morning, she half an hour earlier than me. She would rush to her dorm a hundred metres away and bathe there. I'd get ready and meet her at the mess for breakfast.

'This is your assignment and this is my quant worksheet.' She'd take out the stack of work from last night and divide it in the mess. We'd go to class together, and if Kanyashree was in a good mood, she'd switch places with Ananya for a day. Otherwise, we'd take our original seats and stare at each other through class. The five Mohits were quite amused at first, but later adjusted quite well and turned to check us out only when the lecture got boring. In fact, her moving in with me created a mini scandal. Like it always happens, I earned the tag of a stud. And she earned tags ranging from stupidly-in-love to slut. But it didn't matter to her as maybe she was stupidly in love. Every day in class, she would pass me a note.

'I miss you. Can't wait to cuddle with you after class,' it said, and it came to me via Ankur, Bipin, Bhupin, ten other students and Kanyashree. We lived with each other, yet she missed me in class from six rows away.

'Stop sending such notes in class. People will open them,' I warned.

'You are no fun,' she replied with several sad smiles. Bipin smiled as he passed the note. OK, so someone had entertainment in class.

'You are a whisker away from being in the top ten. One more A in the statistics final exam and you are there,' she said one night three months after she had moved in with me.

'I can't believe I'm studying so much. In IIT, all we'd do is chat all night.' I switched off the lights.

'We could chat all night,' she said as we tucked under the quilt together.

'About what? And why? We are with each other all the time. Why sacrifice sleep?'

'Still, we could talk. Future plans and stuff.'

The word 'future' and females is a dangerous combination. Still, in business school future could merely mean placement. 'We've good grades. You'll easily get HLL. It is the best marketing job, right? And I'll go for WPM.'

'WPM?'

'Whoever pays more, so I can save as much money as fast as possible,' I grinned.

'You still serious about becoming a writer, right?' She ran her fingers through my hair.

'Yes but I'm still wondering what I'd write about,' I yawned.

'About anything. Like that girlfriend of yours.'

'Ananya, we had a pact. We will not talk about my ex-girlfriend again.'

'Sorry, sorry. You said you had a deal with the Prof for grades, so I thought maybe it will make an interesting story.'

'Good night, my strategist.' I kissed her and lay down.

'I love you,' she said.

'Mean it?'

'Yes.'

'How come you said it now?'

'I think about it a lot. I only articulated it now. Good night,' she said.

One-and-a-half years later

'Tell me your thoughts. Don't you like to talk after making love?'

Actually, I prefer to look at the fan above. Or drift into a nap. Why do women want to talk all the time? We were in my room. We were snugly wrapped up on a cloudy, winder afternoon.

'I love to talk,' I said carefully. 'Do you have something in mind?'

'It's one week to placement and I'm nervous,' she said.

'Don't worry, every company has short-listed you. You will hit the jackpot.'

'I'm not nervous about receiving a job offer. What after that?'

'After that? Finally, we will have money in the bank. No more scrimping while ordering in restaurants, no more front row seats in theatres, no more second-class train travel. College is fun, but sorry, I've had my share of slumming it. Imagine, you can shop every month!'

'I don't like shopping.'

'Fine, you can save the money. Or travel to exotic places.'

Her face turned more thoughtful.

'You OK?' I asked.

'Do you realize we leave campus in four weeks?'

'Good riddance. No more mugging and grades, hopefully for life,' I said.

Her voice dropped an octave. 'What about us?'

'About us what?' I asked with an idiotic, confused expression exclusive to men when they have to get all meaningful with women.

She sat up and wore her top. She stepped off the bed to wear the rest of her clothes. Despite the serious mood, I couldn't help but notice how wonderful women looked when they change. 'I'm going to my room. Enjoy your nap,' she said.

'Hey,' I extended my arm and stopped her. 'What's up? I am talking, no?'

'But like a dork. We could be in different cities in four weeks. It will never be like this again.'

'What do you mean never?' I said, my mouth open.

'Wear your clothes first. I want to have a serious discussion.'

She kept quiet until I finished dressing. We sat across, cross-legged on the bed.

'Here is the deal,' I said, collecting my thoughts. 'You are the career focused one, I am doing it for the money. So, I will try to get a job in the same city as you. But the issue is, we don't know which city you will be in. So how can I do anything about it now?'

'And what will you do next week? We are all going to get placed around the same time. You can't wait for me to get a job.'

'So let fate play out,' I said.

'And what about our future? Or sorry, I should ask, is there a future?'

'I can't really talk about that now,' I said.

'Oh really, can you give me a time in the future when we can talk about the future?'

I kept quiet.

'Forget it, I'm leaving,' she said and made for the door.

'I need time to think,' I said.

'Two years are not enough?'

I kept quiet.

'You know it baffles me,' Ananya said, 'how you men need so much time to think about commitment, but how you need no time at all to decide when you have to sleep with the girl.'

'Ananya,' I began only to hear the door slam shut.

'You'll be fine,' she told me for the fifth time. We took a four-kilometre walk outside campus to reach Navrangpura. I wanted to be as far from the madness as possible. Day Zero, or the first day of placement, had ended and I hadn't got a job.

'I thought with my grades I will crack Day Zero,' I said.

'Who cares? There're six more days left for placements,' she said.

We stopped at a roadside vendor for pao-bhaji. She ordered two plates with less butter. 'You will be fine. See, marketing companies don't even start until tomorrow. I have my big HLL interview. I'm not stressed.'

'You'll get in. I can't think of a single company who can say no to you,' I said.

She looked at me and smiled. 'You do realize that not everyone is in love with me.'

'You have good grades and a passion for marketing. You are so HLL, I can see it on your face.'

'You have two more banks tomorrow.'

'I want Citibank,' I said. 'I should have better answers than "I like the money". I need to lie better in interviews.'

The waiter served us. She broke a piece of the pao and fed me. 'But that's the only reason why anyone would work in a bank, right?'

'Yes, but the interviewers like to believe they are doing something meaningful. Like they work for the Mother Teresa Foundation or something.'

'Well you should say this – I want Citibank as I want Indians to have access to world-class financial services. And use words like "enormous growths" and "strategic potential",' she said.

'I have to say all that without throwing up?'

'And remember, the Citi never sleeps. So say you will work hard,' she said.

'I can't lie that much,' I said.

She laughed as she wiped a bit of bhaji off the corner of my mouth. I thought how lucky I was to have her. She could be running HLL in a few years, but today her priority was to wipe bhaji off my stupid face. Guilt knotted within me. She deserved an answer about the future. Do it, loser, I told myself. Do it now. Even if it is a makeshift pao bhaji stall in Navrangpura. I gathered the courage to sopeak.

'What? You want to say something?'

'Do you want more pao?' I said.

'You are third,' a first-year student volunteer who assisted in placements told me. I sat on a stool with seven other candidates outside the interview room. We resembled patients at a dentist's clinic, only more stressed.

The HLL interviews were on in the room across me. Ananya had moved up all the rounds and now waited to be called one last time. I reflected on what had gone wrong on Day Zero. OK, I only wanted a job for the money, but I had hidden that when they spoke to me. ***Then why did I screw up with five banks yesterday? What if Citi also screws me?*** I thought. Sweat beads popped on my forehead. ***Was it destiny leading me to doom after all these degrees and grades? Is God not on my side?*** I wondered if I had given any reason to God not to be on my side. I saw the HLL room from a distance. Ananya stood outside, looking beautiful in a peacock blue sari. ***Maybe God will not let me decide my future unless I give her clarity on her future.***

‘Krish Malhotra,’ the student volunteer called my name.

I offered mental prayers and stood up. I checked my tie knot and shirt collars. ***Remember you need this job,*** I told myself. Banks pay double, I could quit a corporate career twice as fast to do whatever I wanted to. I breathed in deeply and exhaled.

‘Welcome, take your seat,’ a man in an impeccable black suit spoke from his chair. He was rich enough to wear a Rolex watch and obnoxious enough not to look at me while he addressed me. He rifled through a pile of resumes to find mine.

‘Good afternoon.’ I extended my hand. I flexed my forearm muscles as people say a tight handshake is a sign of confidence and world domination.

‘Rahul Ahuja, managing director, corporate finance,’ he said and shook hands with me. He pointed to his colleague on the right. ‘And this is Devesh Sharma, vice-president in HR.’

I looked at Devesh, a thirty-year-old executive with the timidity of a three-year-old. He came across as someone who could be kicked around despite being called vice-president. Anyway, I’d heard Citibank had four hundred vice-presidents to accommodate careers and egos of hundreds of new MBAs that joined every year. Of course, it took away the relevance of the title but at least it gave you a good introduction. Rahul signaled Devesh to start.

‘So Krish, I notice you have poor grades in your undergrad,’ Devesh spoke in a voice so effeminate, he’d be the obvious choice for female leads in college plays.

‘You are pretty observant,’ I said.

‘Excuse me?’ Devesh said, surprised.

Cut the wisecracks, I told myself. ‘Nothing,’ I cleared my throat.

‘So, what happened?’

A girlfriend, fun-loving friends, alcohol, grass and crap profs happened, I wanted to say. But Ananya had told me the right answer. ‘Actually, Mr. Sharma,’ I said, emphasizing his name so he felt good, ‘when I entered IIT, I didn’t realize the rigours demanded by the system. And once you have a bad start, due to relative grading, it is quite hard to come back. I did get good grades in the last semester and my IIMA grades are good. So, as you can see, I’ve made up.’

There were twenty minutes of stupid questions like ‘will credit cards grow in India?’ or ‘can India improve its banking services?’ where you easily answer what they want to hear (yes, they will grow and, yes, India can improve heaps). Finally, they asked the big question, ‘Why Citibank?’

I want Citibank because none of the other five banks worked out. I sucked in my breath along with my stupid thoughts. ***BS time, buddy,*** I thought, ***the ten seconds that will determine your career start now.***

‘Mr Ahuja, the question is not why Citi. The real question is why would any ambitious young person want to go anywhere else? It is the biggest private bank in the world, it has a great reputation, it is committed to India, and there are opportunities in almost every area of the bank. It is not a bank, it is a growth machine.’

I paused to see if I had gone over the top. But Rahul listened with rapt attention and Devesh nodded. Yes, they were falling for it.

‘And, ultimately the biggest reason is, Rahul,’ I said, switching to the first name to show my closeness to him, ‘I really want to work with people I look up to. When I see you, I want to be you. And Citi gives me a shot at it.’

Rahul flushed with pride. ‘How...I mean, how do you know you want to be me?’

No matter how accomplished people get, they don’t stop fishing for compliments. ‘I saw you at the pre-placement talk. I’ve attended dozens of talks, but the way you presented showed more thought clarity than anyone else. I think it is a Citibank thing. You people have a different confidence. Right, Devesh?’

Devesh looked at me, perplexed. ‘Actually, we at human resources pick the best talent,’ he parroted, probably from a manual.

‘HR does nothing. I personally pick everyone for the job,’ Rahul said as the two jostled for my attention.

'It shows,' I said.

Rahul pushed back his chair and stood up. 'Listen Krish, I like you. So between us, let me be honest. We are mostly done with the recruitment and have only one place left. But we have internal criteria; we need seven-point grade in undergrad to take new recruits.'

Fuck. My past sins would not let go of me. Maybe that is why the five banks had rejected me.

"and this missed semester....' He tapped my undergrad grade sheete.

'Research semester, sir' I corrected.

'I don't know about that. Devesh?'

Devesh, like anyone who works in HR, had never taken a real decision in his life. 'It's a business call, sir,' he said.

'I head my business,' Rahul said.

'Yes, but you may want to talk to the country manager,' Devesh said, scared to make a suggestion.

'I'm senior to him. I came from New York. He's just connected so he became country manager. You know that, right?'

'Sir, but grade-wise....' Devesh paused and both of them looked at me.

'Can you give us five minutes?' Rahul asked.

'Sure, I'll wait outside,' I obliged with an ingratiating grin.

'Thanks, we'll call you in again. So, don't send the next candidate.'

8

I stepped out of the Citi interview room. I scanned the list of remaining companies on the notice board. Everyone else paid half of Citibank. I found an empty stool to sit on and closed my eyes to pray. God appeared in front of me.

‘Hello God,’ I said, ‘I’ve not said one true thing in that interview today. But I want the job, please.’

‘They don’t want to hear the truth. So, that’s OK,’ God said. ‘But that’s not what you should be worried about.’

‘Then what?’

‘You have lived with a girl for two years.’

‘I love her, God,’ I said.

‘Love is not enough. You know what you have to do.’

‘I will, I just need time.’

‘You are well past your time. In four minutes, I could let your last bank job slip away,’ God said.

‘No God, I want Citibank.’

‘I want you to do the right thing first.’

‘How?’ I opened my eyes. I looked at the HLL room. Ananya had gone inside the room. I closed my eyes again. ‘How?’ I repeated. ‘She is in an interview. I promise to do it after I get my Citibank job.’

‘I don’t trust you. Anyway, upto you. You don’t listen to me, I don’t listen to you,’ God said.

I opened my eyes. I had three minutes. Ananya would kill me if I went inside the room. But a voice inside told me that if I didn’t go to her, the Citi country manager or Rahul or Devesh could decide against me. Of course, my rational mind knew I was being completely moronic. Both the events were not connected. But there is only so much our rational mind knows. Maybe, events and karma are connected. I ran to the HLL room.

‘Excuse me,’ the volunteer on the door said, blocking me.

'I need to go inside,' I said, 'urgent.'

'There's an inter....'

I forced my way inside. HLL was conducting its final interviews in one of the classrooms. The company staff sat in the front row of the class while the candidate sat in the prof's chair.

Ananya faced a panel of five elderly people in the room. She was moving her hands in an animated manner as she spoke. 'The rural market doesn't need different products. They need affordability....' She stopped mid-sentence upon noticing me. Her eyebrows elevated in shock and stayed there.

'Yes?' a sixtyish-year-old gentleman turned to me.

Ananya's face turned pink, then red. The colour coordination came from embarrassment and anger, respectively.

'I need to talk to her,' I said slowly, scanning everyone in the room.

'Can't it wait?' the old gentleman asked. 'She is having her final interview. All our senior management is here.'

'Actually, it can't,' I said.

'Everything OK?' another panelist said.

'Yes, I only need a minute,' I said and signalled to Ananya to come out.

'What? Just tell me here,' she said, throwing me a dirty look.

I saw the panel's confused expression. I went up to Ananya.

'What?' she whispered, 'Are you mad?'

I knelt down next to her, my mouth close to her ear. 'Sorry, how is it going?' I whispered.

'Krish Malhotra, this better be important. What's up?' she whispered, loud enough for the panel to hear.

'Ananya Swaminathan, I, Krish Malhotra, am deeply in love with you and want to be with you always. Apart from where we go to office, of course. Will you marry me?'

Ananya's mouth fell open. She alternated her glance between the panel and me. "Krish," she said. She tried hard but a tear slipped out of her carefully eye-lined eyes.

'Everything OK?' one panel member asked as he noticed Ananya's restlessness. 'It's not bad news, I hope.'

Ananya shook her head as she took a sip from the glass of water in front of her. 'No, it's not bad news at all. It's good.'

'Ananya,' I whispered again. My knees hurt as they rubbed against the rough classroom floor.

'What now?'

'Is that a yes? Will you be with me, always?' I asked.

She tightened her lips to hide a laugh. 'Yes, you idiot. I will be with you. Just not right now. So, go!'

‘Wow, this feels special,’ Ananya said.

She opened her HLL offer letter for the third time at Rambhai’s. I had collected mine from Citibank the day before and, after confirming the salary, had dumped it in my cupboard.

‘It’s an invitation to be a slave, don’t get so excited,’ I said as I ordered a samosa sandwich.

‘Aw, don’t be morbid. They are thrilled about hiring me. HLL has a serious South India strategy.’

Rambhai’s minions served us tea. During placement time, tips peaked for them.

‘Do you go to school?’ Ananya asked the thirteen-year-old boy who served us.

‘Yes, Rambhai sends me,’ the boy said.

‘Good, because if he doesn’t, report him to the police,’ Ananya said and gave the boy a fifty rupee note.

‘They will post you in South India,’ is aid, ‘in one of those unpronounceable places without an STD code.’

‘No, they won’t. And if they do, my husband will come and rescue me.’ She winked.

‘Ananya, you don’t get it. *We* have decided to get married. Our parents haven’t approved – yet,’ I reminded her.

‘C’mon, mine are a bit conservative. But we are their overachieving children, the ultimate middle-class fantasy kids. Why would they have an issue?’

‘Because they are parents. From biscuits to brides, if there is anything their children really want, parents have a problem,’ I said.

‘Your parents will have a problem with me?’ Ananya pulled her hair back to tie it in a loose bun. She clenched a pin in the middle of her teeth.

'They'd have a problem with anyone I choose. And you are South Indian, which doesn't help at all. OK, it's not as bad as marrying someone from another religion. But pretty close.'

'But I also aced my college. I have an MBA from IIMA and work for HLL. And sorry to brag, but I am kind of pretty.'

'Irrelevant. You are Tamilian. I am Punjabi.'

Ananya folded her offer letter and rearranged things in her bag.

'What? Say something?'

'Can't be part of this backward conversation,' she said. 'Please, discuss your woes with the Punjabi brethren.'

She stood up to leave. I tugged her down by her hand. 'C'mon Ananya, aren't your parents going to flip out when they find out you have a Punjabi boyfriend?'

'No, I don't think so.'

'Have you told them?'

'No.'

'Why?'

'Waiting for the appropriate time. The convocation is in two weeks. They'll be here, I will introduce you. Tell them what you have done in life, not where your ancestors were born. They can meet your parents. They are coming, right?'

'My mother, yes. Father, I don't know.'

'What's the deal?'

'Let's not talk about it.'

'You won't tell your future wife? Have you invited him?'

'No.'

She stood up, I followed suit. 'Let's go to the STD booth,' she said.

'Now?'

'This strong and silent warfare between you and your dad is becoming too much.'

'It's peak hour rates.'

'I don't care.'

We walked to the STD booth near Vijay Char Rasta. I called home. 'Hi, mom, it is me.'

'Krish, we should book tickets. I am coming, Shipra masi wants to come, Rajji mama and Kamla aunty, too.'

'Mom, is dad coming?'

'No,' she said and fell silent.

'It's my convocation,' I said.

'He said he has work.'

'He's retired. What work?' the meter rode up twenty rupees.

'You talk to him, he expects a personal invitation,' my mother said.

'I won't. Doesn't he want to come by himself?'

'No, why don't you ask him to?' She prepared to put me on hold.

'Mom, no. I don't want to call him if he doesn't want to come.'

'Fine. Can masi and mama come?'

'Don't get any relatives,' I pleaded.

'Why? They love you so much. They want to see you....'

'I want you to meet someone, mom.'

'Who?'

'You'll find out,' I said.

I came out of the booth. Ananya and I walked back. ***Which father needs an invitation from his son to attend his convocation? Screw him,*** I said to myself.

'You invited him?' Ananya asked.

'Dad's not coming,' I said.

'Why?'

‘We have no relationship, Ananya. Don’t try to fix it ever. OK?’

‘What happened though?’

‘I don’t want to talk about it.’

‘Standard answer.’

‘Yours was a standard question.’

‘You do care for him. You are upset.’

‘I’m upset about paying peak hour rates. Now listen, I’ve fended off my aunts with great difficulty. It’s only my mom. You have a plan, right?’

She skipped ahead of me. ‘Let’s make it a great first meeting of the families. We should do something fun together.’

‘Like shoot each other?’

‘Shut up. It’ll be fine. They’d love it that my boyfriend is from IIT.’

‘They won’t ask my grades, right?’

‘They might. But who cares, you will be in Citibank. Listen, we organize an outing for them?’

‘I am not so sure if our families would like to spend so much time together.’

‘Of course, they would. You leave it to me. Your mom will love me more than you after this,’ she said as we reached the campus gates.

I received my mother at the Ahmedabad railway station a day before the convocation. Ananya’s parents flew down, her father using his LTC that allowed him to fly once every four years. My mother arrived with two suitcases. One had her clothes and the other contained mithai boxes sourced from various shops in Delhi.

'I'm in college for five more days. Why so many sweets?' I asked in the auto back to campus.

'We will eat them, no? And we might meet people. They will say her son is graduating and she has nothing to offer us. I almost brought packed meals. I don't want to eat the Gujarati daal with sugar. Is it really sweet?'

'It's not that sweet. Anyway, I want you to meet someone, mom,' I said as the auto struggled to penetrate the narrow lanes near the railway station.

'Who?'

'There's this girl,' I said.

'You have a Girlfriend? *Girlfriend?*' she asked as if I had contacted AIDS.

'A good friend,' I said to calm her down.

'Good friend? What, you have bad friends also?'

'No, mom. We used to study together. We did a lot of projects together.'

'OK. Did she get a job?'

'Yes, in HLL. It's a good job.'

'HLL?'

'The company that makes Surf. And Rin and Lifebuoy and Kissan Sauce.' I named products, hoping that one of them would impress her.

'Kissan Jams also?' she asked after thinking for thirty seconds.

'Yes. She is in marketing. It's the most prestigious marketing job.'

'She will get free jams then?'

'I guess,' I said, wondering how to bring the conversation back on track. 'But that's not the point.'

'Yes, it's not. So, should we stop for lunch before we go to your college or do we eat in college? Bhaiya, any good restaurants here?' she addressed the auto driver.

'Mom, stop. I am talking about something important.'

But my mother said, 'These auto drivers always know good places.'

'Stopping is extra, madam,' the auto driver said, ignoring me along with every speed-breaker on the road.

'What?' my mother said as I continued to stare at her to get her attention.

'Her name is Ananya. Her parents are also here. I want you to meet them and be nice to them.'

'I will meet whoever you want me to meet. And when am I not nice? We are nice people only.'

'Mom.....' I said before she interrupted me.

'Let's take some Nice biscuits on the way. They are good with tea.'

'Mom,' I screamed. 'This is what I don't want. I want you to meet them properly and not obsess about meals or snacks or tea or whatever. They should have a good impression.'

My mother gave me a dirty look. I didn't respond.

'Bhaiya, turn the auto. I am going back,' my mother said. 'One, I come all the way from Delhi to attend your convocation, get mithai from four different shops, and now I can't make a good impression. It's OK, if we can't make a good impression then we won't come.'

My mother kept mumbling to herself. She had officially entered her drama mode. The driver stopped the auto.

'What? Why have you stopped?' I asked, exasperated.

'Madam is telling me to turn back.'

'Mom,' I said as she continued to sulk.

'So, you remember I am your mother? I thought you only cared about your friend's parents?'

Anger filled my mother's voice. I had to take emergency measures.

'There is an excellent pao-bhaji place round the corner. Bhaiya, just take us to Law Garden.'

'I'm not hungry,' my mother said.

'Only for tasting,' I said. I tapped the auto driver on his shoulder. The driver turned towards Law Garden.

I ordered paneer pao-bhaji with extra butter and lassi on the side. Nothing soothes an upset Punjabi like dairy products.

‘Who is this girl?’ she asked after finishing the lassi.

‘Nobody important. She wanted to meet you after I told her how much trouble you took to bring me up because of dad,’ I lied.

Maybe it was the extra butter or my words. My mother calmed down. ‘You told her everything?’ she asked.

‘No, only a little. Also, her parents may be a bit formal. That’s why I spoke about making a good impression. Otherwise, who wouldn’t love to meet you?’

‘What do Gujaratis eat for dessert? Or do they put all the sugar in their food? My mother picked up the menu again.

10

The next morning, two hundred fresh MBA graduates and their insanely proud parents sat in the Louis Kahn Plaza lawns for the convocation. The chief guest, a third generation silver-spoon-at-birth industrialist, told students to work hard and come to the top. He also had the tough job of handing out degrees and posing for pictures with two hundred students. Today, we had to collect our post-graduate diploma in management, a ticket to a lifetime of overpaid jobs. Ananya wanted everything to be perfect. She had reached the venue half an hour earlier to secure six seats for her family and mine.

My mother wore her best sari. I wore graduation robes rented for thirty bucks.

‘Mom, this is Ananya. Ananya, my mother,’ I said when we reached the premises.

Ananya extended her arm to shake my mother’s hand. My mother looked shocked. While Ananya touching her feet would be too much, I felt Ananya should have stuck to a Namaste. Anything modern doesn’t go down well with parents.

‘Hello, aunty. I have heard so much about you,’ Ananya said.

‘Actually, since I have arrived I am only hearing about you.’ My mother smiled, making it difficult to spot the sarcasm.

‘Let’s sit down. Ananya, where is your family?’ I asked as we sat down.

‘My mother takes forever to put on her sari. I came first to get good seats.’

Ananya wore the same peacock blue sari that she wore to her HLL interview. She caught me staring and blew a kiss. Fortunately, my mother didn’t notice. I shook my head, beseeching Ananya to maintain decorum.

Ananya’s parents arrived ten minutes later. Her father wore a crisp white shirt, like the one in detergent ads. Ananya’s mother walked behind in a glittery haze. Her magenta and gold Kanjeevaram sari could be noticed from any corner of the lawn. She looked as if she had fallen into a drum of golden paint. Behind her walked a fourteen-year-old boy with spectacles; a miniature version of MBA men who would get a degree this evening.

‘Hello mom,’ Ananya said and stood up, her voice her cheerful best.

'Safety pin illa something something,' her mother replied. Mother and daughter lapsed into Tamil. Ananya's father took out his camera and started taking random pictures of everything around us – the lawns, the stage, the chairs, the mikes. Little brother didn't have much to do but looked uncomfortable in his new button-down collar shirt. My mother heard them talk and her mouth fell open.

I whispered, 'Get up. Let us introduce ourselves.'

'They are Madrasi?' my mother asked, shocked.

'Shsh, Tamilian,' I said.

'Tamilian?' my mother echoed even as Ananya continued the introductions.

'Mom, this is Krish, and this is Krish's mother.'

"Hello,' Ananya's mother said, looking just as stunned as my mother.

'Isn't this cool? Our families meeting for the first time,' Ananya cooed even as everyone ignored her.

'Krish's father has not come?' Ananya's father asked.

'He is not well,' my mother said, her voice butter-soft. 'He is a heart patient. Advised not to travel.'

My mother faked it so well, even I felt like sympathizing with her.

Ananya's parents gave understanding nods. They whispered to each other in Tamil as they took their places.

'I better go, I'm one of the first ones.' Ananya giggled and ran up to join the line of students.

I sat sandwiched between my mother on one side and Ananya's mother on the other.

'You want to sit next to Ananya's mother?' I asked my mother.

'Why? Who are these people?' she frowned.

'Don't panic, mom. I said it because I have to join that line soon.'

'Then go. I have come to see you, not sit next to Madrasis. Now let me watch,' she said.

The chief guest started the diploma distribution. The audience broke into continuous applause for the initial students. Then they got tired and went back to fanning themselves with the convocation brochures.

‘Get to know them. We’ll probably go for lunch together,’ I said.

‘You go for lunch with them. I can eat alone,’ my mother said.

‘Mom....’ I said as the announcer read out Ananya’s name.

Ananya walked on the stage, probably the only student whose picture was worth taking. I stood up and applauded.

My mother gave me a dirty look. ‘Sit. Even her parents are not standing.’

Maybe they don’t love her like I do, I wanted to say but didn’t. I sat down. Ananya’s parents clapped gently, craning their necks to get a better view. Ananya’s mother looked at me with suspicion. I realized that I hadn’t yet spoken to her. *Start a conversation, you idiot*, I thought.

‘Your daughter is such a star. You must be so proud,’ I said.

‘We are used to it. She always did well in school,’ Ananya’s mother replied.

I tried her father. ‘How long are you here for, uncle?’

Uncle looked up and down at me as if I had questioned him about his secret personal fantasies.

‘We leave day after. Why?’ he said.

Some whys have no answer, apart from the fact that I was trying to make small talk. ‘Nothing, Ananya and I were wondering if you wanted to see the city. We can share a car,’ I said.

Ananya’s mother sat between us and listened to every word. She spoke to her husband in Tamil. ‘Something something Gandhi Ashram something recommend something.’

‘Gandhi Ashram is nice. My mother also wants to see it.’ I said.

‘What?’ my mother said from her seat. ‘Don’t you have to go on stage, Krish? Your turn is coming.’

'Yes,' I said and stood up. Gandhi Ashram would be a good start for the families. He stood for peace and national integration, maybe that could inspire us all.

'Then go,' my mother said.

'Wait,' I said and bent to touch her feet.

'Thank god, you remembered. I thought you were going to touch Ananya's mother's feet,' she said.

My mother said it loud enough for Ananya's mother to hear. They exchanged cold glances that could be set to the backdrop of AK-47 bullets being fired. Surely, it would take a Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi to make them get along.

'Mom, control,' I whispered to her as I turned to leave.

'I am under control. These South Indians don't know how to control their daughters. From Hema Malini to Sridevi, all of them trying to catch Punjabi men.'

My mother had spoken so loud that the entire row heard her. For a few moments, people's attention shifted from the convocation ceremony to us.

Ananya's mother elbowed her husband. They stood up, pulled up Ananya's scrawny brother between them and found some empty seats five rows away.

'Mom, what are you doing?' I struggled to balance the graduation cap on my head.

'Kanyashree Banerjee,' the announcer said over the mike and I realised I was horribly late. I had missed my last convocation as I had overslept. I didn't want to miss it this time.

'What have I said? It's a fact,' my mom said, talking to me but addressing everyone who had tuned into our conversation that beat the boring degree distribution hollow any day.

'Krish....' I heard my name and ran up. The five Mohits were waiting near the stage. I smiled at them as I climbed the steps to the stage. The chief guest gave me my diploma.

My mother was standing and clapping. 'I love you,' she screamed. I smiled back at her. For the last ten years my father had told her that her son would get nowhere in life. I held up my diploma high and looked up to thank God.

'Move, the next student has to come,' the announcer said as I emotionally thanked the chief guest again and again. As I walked down the steps, I saw Ananya's parents. They had not applauded or even reacted to my being on the stage. I came back towards my seat. Ananya stood at our row's entrance, looking lost. 'I stayed back to get some pictures with friends. Where are my parents?'

'Five rows behind,' I said.

'Why? What happened?'

'Nothing. They wanted a better view,' I said.

'I've booked the car. We are all going afterwards, right?'

'Go to your parents, Ananya,' I said firmly as I saw my mother staring at me.

11

'We've already paid for the taxi,' I said. 'So, you can pretend to get along. See it as a budget exercise.'

My mother and I walked towards the taxi stand outside campus. She had no inclination to see where MR Gandhi lived. The Sabarmati Ashram, on the outskirts of the city, was a key tourist attraction. Ananya had got lunch packed in little packets from Topaz. According to her, it would be a Kodak moment to picnic somewhere by the Sabarmati river. Of course, she had no idea about her missed Kodak moment when my mother had made insightful comments about certain South Indian actresses.

'We had booked a Qualis,' I told the driver who stood next to an Indica. Ananya and her family were already at the taxi stand. Her mother looked like she had just finished a grumble session, maybe her natural expression.

'The Qualis is on election duty. We only have this.' The driver crushed tobacco in his palm.

'How can we all fit in?' I wondered.

'We take double the passengers, squeeze in,' the driver said.

'Let's take an auto,' I said.

'I'm not taking an auto,' my mother said as she slid into the backseat.

'You can sit in front and make madam sit in your lap,' the driver pointed Ananya to me. Ananya's mother gave the driver a glare strong enough to silence him for the rest of the day.

'Mom, can you take an auto?' Ananya requested her mother.

'Why, we have also paid for this,' she said. 'Something something illa illa!'

'Seri, seri, Amma,' Ananya said.

We finally arrived at an arrangement. Ananya's dad sat in front with Ananya in his lap. Ananya's mother sat behind with her son in her lap. My mother had

already taken a window seat behind the driver. I squished myself between the two ladies in the middle.

The Sabarmati Ashram is eight kilometers away from campus. The twenty-minute drive felt like an hour due to the silence. Ananya tried to make conversation with her parents. They pretended not to hear her as they kept their heads out of the windows. My mother took out a packet of Nice biscuits and started eating them without offering them to anyone. She took one biscuit and put it in my mouth, to assert maternal rights on me. Of course, I couldn't refuse.

'Why is everyone so silent,' Ananya said to me as we went to the ticket counter at the ashram.

'My mother made a silly comment at the convocation,' I said, hoping Ananya won't seek details.

'What did she say?' Ananya asked as she fished for the required amount of money for six tickets.

'It's not important. But your parents left after that.'

'What exactly did she say?' Ananya persisted.

'Nothing, something about South Indian women being loose or something. No big deal.'

'What?' Ananya looked at me, shocked.

'I didn't say it. She did. Silly comment, ignore it.'

'I don't know what to say,' Ananya said.

'Nothing. Let's get everyone talking again,' I said as we walked to the main entrance.

We came inside the ashram. Gandhi lived here from 1915 to 1930. The famous Salt March started from this ashram. Ananya appointed a guide, for no other

reason than to keep everyone walking together. We passed the exhibits – various pictures, paintings, letters and articles of Gandhi.

‘And when Mr. Gandhi left in 1930 for the Dandi March, he vowed never to return to the ashram until India won its independence,’ the guide said in a practiced voice. ‘And he didn’t after that day.’

‘Did he come back after India became free?’ Ananya’s mother wanted to know.

‘Alas,’ the guide sighed, ‘he couldn’t. He was shot dead within six months of independence.’

My mother, not to be left behind in asking of questions, turned to the guide. ‘Why is it called Dandi March? Because he carried a stick?’

The guide laughed. Like all his mannerisms, his laugh was dramatic, too. ‘How little we know about the greatest man in India. No madam, Dandi is the name of a place, five hundred kilometers away from here.’

The guide took us to an exhibit of the map and pointed to the coastal town.

Ananya’s mother turned to her father and spoke in Tamil. ‘Something something illa knowledge Punjabi people something.’

‘Seri, seri,’ Ananya’s father said in a cursory manner, engrossed in the map. Ananya’s mother continued. ‘Intellectually, culturally zero. Something something crass uneducated something.’

I don’t know if Ananya’s mother realised her use of the few English words, or maybe she planted them intentionally. She had made her comeback. My mother heard her and looked at me. The guide looked worried as his tip was in danger.

‘So, you see, Gandhiji strongly believed that all Indians are one. Anyway, let us now see Gandhiji’s personal belongings. This way, please.’ The guide said, breaking the Antarctic glances between the two mothers.

We sat down for lunch under a tree in the ashram complex, looking like we were on death row. Everyone ate in silence as Ananya dropped the news. ‘We like each other.’

Everyone looked at each other in confusion. Most people did not like each other in this group.

‘Krish and I, we like each other,’ Ananya smiled.

‘I told you. I smelled something fishy…….’ My mother tore her chapatti.

'There's nothing fishy. There's nothing to be worried about. We just wanted to share our happiness. We are just two people in love,' Ananya said as her mother interrupted her.

'Shut up, Ananya!' Ananya's mother glared at her. I wondered if she would slap her. And I wondered if Ananya would offer her second cheek considering we were in Gandhi's ashram.

'This is what I meant when I said about South Indian girls. There are so many cases in Delhi only,' my mother said, itching to slam Ananya's mom again.

'Mom, chill,' I said.

'What have I said? Did I say anything?' my mother asked.

'Get up,' Ananya's mother said to her husband. Like a TV responding to a remote, he stood. Ananya's brother followed. 'We will take an auto back,' Ananya's mother said.

Ananya sat under the tree, perplexed.

'Now you will stay with them?' Ananya's mother asked.

'Mom, please!' Ananya sounded close to tears.

Ananya's mother tugged at Ananya and pulled her away. The guide noticed them leave and looked puzzled. I paid him off and came back to my mother. She finished the last few spoons of Topaz's paneer tikka masala under the tree.

'They are gone,' I said.

'Good. There'll be more space in the car,' she said.