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ACT II

Bihar

Dumraon, District Buxar, Bihar

I wanted to surprise my mother, so I told her I was arriving a day later than the actual date. I reached the Dumraon railway station after a fourteen-hour train journey from Delhi.

As I walked out of the station, the familiar smells of my childhood hit me straightaway.

There is nothing spectacular about my hometown. It is a small place, less than three kilometres across on any side. Its only claim to fame is being one of the oldest princely states of India. My family had something to do with that achievement. However, I don't know if I can feel proud for what my ancestors did ten generations ago, Dumraon is in Buxar district, around sixteen kilometres from Buxar town on the banks of the Ganges. If you were not sleeping in history class you would have heard of the Great Battle of Buxar in 1764. Frankly, it should be renamed the Embarrassing Battle of Buxar. The battle was fought between the British East India Company and the combined armies of three Indian rulers—Mir Qasim, the Nawab of Bengal; Shuja-ud-Daula, the Nawab of Awadh; and the Mughal king, Shah Alam II. The Indian side had forty thousand troops. The British had less than ten thousand. Guess what happened? The British clobbered us. How? Well, the three Indian kings ended up fighting with each other. Each Indian king had cut a side deal with the British and worked against the other. In a day, the British had won the battle and taken control of most of India. I don't think Indians have learnt much since that day. We remain as divided as ever. Everyone still tries to cut a deal for themselves while the nation goes to hell.

Anyway, there is a reason I am telling you this. You may think things are not connected, but think about this. If there was no Battle of Buxar, or if it had had a different outcome, the British may not have ruled India like they did. There would be none of the 'English high

class, rest low class' bullshit that happens in India. There would not even be a St. Stephen's College. Just imagine, if only the jokers in Buxar had done things a little differently, maybe the white man would be speaking Hindi and Bhojpuri would be the new cool.

I took an autorickshaw. 'Raja ki haveli,' I told the driver. He put the auto in first gear and drove off. In Dumraon, our house is a landmark by itself.

It was the bumpiest ride ever. A cloud of dust surrounded us as we drove through the city.

'What happened to the road?' I asked the auto driver.

'There are no roads,' he said and laughed.

*

Twenty minutes later, the auto reached the haveli's main entrance. Fifteen years ago, we had a guard post here. Now, we just had pillars on each side. Along with my three fat suitcases I stood in the central quadrangle, once a beautiful garden. My childhood picture, which Riya had seen, had been taken here. I noticed a stack of bamboo poles and bundles of cloth kept in the quadrangle. Two labourers sat in a corner, smoking beedis.

'What's this?' I said.

'We are putting up a tent,' said one of them.

*

Ma wasn't home when I arrived. I entered my old room. The large wooden doors creaked more than before. The cupboard doors had become stiff. I opened the windows. Sunlight fell on the posters of Shaquille O'Neal and Magic Johnson stuck on my wall for the last five years.

I lay on the bed, staring at the basketball champions. I wondered if I should have focused more on the national trials.

A few hours later my mother returned from school. 'Ma,' I screamed from the window.

My mother saw me as she entered the haveli gate. She waved at me. I rushed downstairs and gave her a big hug. Girlfriends come and

go but, thank God, mothers don't break up with you.

'You said tomorrow,' she said. We sat on one of the living-room sofas, frayed but still elegant.

'I thought I would surprise you,' I said.

'That's nice. But you spoilt our surprise.'

'How?'

Savitri tai, one of my mother's oldest helpers, brought in tea and sweet litti.

'Your coronation. You saw the tents outside, right?'

'What?' I said, a half-eaten litti ball in my hand.

'It's an auspicious day, Ashad Krishna.'

'Ma, I don't want this drama.'

'It isn't drama. It's tradition,' my mother said in a low, emotional voice, the perfect starting point for female drama.

'I'll feel like a joker, being anointed a prince in a democracy.'

My mother stood up and walked to the dining table, her back to me. She remained silent, her most potent weapon. Standing tall at five feet, eight inches, in her starched saree, my mother did look royal. She clenched her fists tight.

I walked up to her.

'Ma, you shouldn't have sent me to college if you wanted me to keep following such rituals.'

My mother spoke, her back still towards me. 'Funny, I was thinking the same thing.'

I went around the dining table to face her. 'We have an MLA,' I said. 'What's his name?'

My mother looked at me in defiance.

'What's his name, Ma?'

'Ojha. Useless fellow.'

'Yes, Ojha. We also have an MP in Buxar and a CM in Patna.'

'The villagers still care for us. You know why?' she said.

'Because they are old-fashioned and uneducated?'

My mother looked at me sharply. 'You've become like them.'

‘Like whom?’

‘The over-educated idiots in big cities. Whenever they don’t understand villagers, they call them uneducated and old-fashioned.’

I listened to her reprimand, keeping my head down. The Rani Sahiba’s rare loss of temper could not be taken lightly.

‘So why do they want to coronate me? Nothing else entertaining happening in Durnraon?’

‘They want to because the so-called government doesn’t seem to care.’

I poured a glass of water and handed it to my mother.

‘Ma, I have finished college and come back. Can you not shout at me within the first hour of meeting me?’

‘Your actions deserve it, so what can I do?’

‘Okay, sorry. I am sorry, Ma.’

She relented and we sat on the sofa again. I placed four more littis on my plate.

‘There’s dinner. Don’t stuff yourself with these,’ Ma said.

‘Sorry,’ I said, and put my plate back on the table.

‘Anyway, it is just a two-hour-long ceremony—the rajyabhishek puja and lunch. What is the problem?’

‘No problem at all. I’ll do it.’

The fan in the room stopped. In seconds, sweat beads appeared on our foreheads. In minutes, mosquitoes hovered over us.

‘What happened?’ I said.

‘Load-shedding. Go thank your government for this,’ my mother said.

'How much longer, Pandit ji?' I said. My back hurt from sitting cross-legged on the floor for over two hours. Marriages get done faster than this. The village priest chanted holy mantras for my peaceful and successful rule. Whatever.

Around two hundred people from Dumraon and nearby villages had come to attend the ceremony. People sat on red plastic chairs. Giant pedestal fans recirculated the hot air.

I recognized a few important guests. MLA Vijay Ojha, a sixty-year-old man who had been in local politics for over forty years, sat in the front row. The district collector and the police inspector sat next to him. Local press reporters took pictures and hovered around them.

Finally, my mother presented the royal crown to Pandit ji; she had taken it out of our family safe. It was one of the few precious items we had left.

Pandit ji placed the two-kilo crown on my head. The crowd applauded. My mother burst into tears. She gave me a hug—an embarrassing public display of affection.

'Happy now?' I said, whispering in her ear.

'My rajkumar.' She hugged me even tighter.

I was sweating profusely in my velvet bandhgala suit. 'Rajkumar is melting in the heat. Can I change?' I said.

I came down from the stage. Reporters made me pose for photos. My mother introduced me to guests even as reporters took my pictures.

'Mubarak, Rajkumar sahib,' said a young man in his twenties. My mother introduced him as Akhtar Hussain, one of the two teachers in her school.

'Call me Madhav,' I said to Akhtar, shaking his hand. He seemed embarrassed at the suggestion.

'Madhav, meet Tej Lal, another teacher at our school, and Tarachand ji, the administrative officer,' my mother said.

I folded my hands to wish both men, each in their fifties. 'I will be joining the school too,' I said.

My mother's staff looked at her in surprise.

'I thought you went to a top college in Delhi,' Akhtar said.

'So?' I said.

'You can get a good job anywhere,' Akhtar said.

'This is not a good job?' I said. Everyone grinned.

MLA Ojha reached us. He had a thick moustache, upwardly mobile on either side.

'Congratulations, Rani Sahiba,' he said.

'Ojha ji, thank you so much for coming,' my mother said.

He folded his hands to take permission to leave.

'But what about lunch?'

'I have two other functions in Buxar. Please excuse me,' he said, hands still folded.

My mother looked at me. She wanted me to persuade him to stay.

'Ojha ji, stay a little while. We can eat together,' I said.

'No, Rajkumar ji. Besides, you won't be done soon. See, the line has built up.'

I turned around to find a queue of about fifty villagers waiting to seek my blessings. A few kids came up to me. They wanted to touch the sword attached to my waist. I guess if you look like a clown, you do attract some attention.

'If only voters loved their netas like they love you,' MLA Ojha said before he left.

One by one, I blessed the villagers.

'Is he a real prince? Like those in stories?' I overheard a young girl whisper to another.

'Of course he is,' her friend said.

'So where is his princess?' the young girl said.

I smiled. My princess had moved to another faraway kingdom.

'What time is school tomorrow, Ma?' I said.

'Seven in the morning. Think about work later. Enjoy being the

ruler today,' she said.

It is no fun being a ruler when someone else still rules you.

*

The Dumraon Royal School is a twenty-minute walk from our haveli. I accompanied my mother as we hiked through fields at 6.30 in the morning. 'There are three shifts, over two hundred students in each,' my mother said. '7 to 10.30, 10.30 to 2, and 2 to 5.30.'

We reached the grey-and-black school building. It seemed much older than the last time I'd seen it.

'Why is it black?' I said.

'Hasn't been painted in five years. Every year, the rains wreck the plaster even more.'

I wondered how Stephen's managed to keep its walls a perfect reddish-brown.

The first-shift kids had arrived. They played in the fields outside the school. We had two classrooms and a common staffroom. The staffroom had a long table with several chairs—the teachers used the room to rest in during breaks or to check notebooks.

'Why is it so dark?' I said.

'Power comes at eight,' my mother said.

The long table had a stack of files and books at three corners.

'Akhtar, Tej and I have a corner each. The empty one is yours,' my mother said.

She sat down on her end. She lit a candle and opened a file.

'These windows could be bigger,' I said.

My mother nodded without looking up. Akhtar, Tej and Tarachand arrived in the next five minutes. They folded their hands when they saw me.

'Please treat me as a new employee,' I said to them.

Amused, Akhtar and Tej collected their books for class. Tarachand stepped outside the staffroom. He rang the brass bell in the corridor. The teachers left for their classes. Tarachand came back and spoke to my mother.

‘SMDC didn’t send anyone,’ he said.

‘Oh no,’ my mother said. ‘He promised. The officer gave me his word, Tara ji.’

‘I went to his house, Rani Sahiba. He said he tried. Hard to justify more funds,’ Tarachand said.

‘We want one toilet. How hard is it to justify funds for one toilet for seven hundred children?’ my mother said.

‘He said most schools in the area manage without one. Why is Rani Sahiba fussing?’

‘Ask him for half a toilet. Tell him to make one for the girls. One girls’ toilet, Tara ji,’ my mother said.

‘Don’t embarrass me, Rani Sahiba. I tried. We need money for so many other things too. We need to plaster the roofs, make more rooms and whitewash the building. SMDC said they have nothing.’

Noises came from the corridor. Kids had assembled outside.

‘Make them sit, please,’ my mother said.

Tarachand stepped out to manage the crowd. The children sat down at one end of the corridor. They faced a wall painted black.

My mother held her forehead with her right hand.

‘You okay?’ I said to her.

She nodded.

‘What’s SMDC?’

‘The School Monitoring and Development Committee. A government body meant to help rural schools. They come, watch and leave. Nobody ever helps anyone.’

The lights came on. The fan above started to creak. The cool breeze felt wonderful on my sweaty skin. My mother leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, enjoying the fan’s breeze.

‘Why are the children sitting in the corridor?’ I said, disturbing her reverie.

‘Huh? Oh, that is class I,’ my mother said.

The morning shift had classes I to IV. Classes II, III and IV used the available classrooms. Class I used the corridor as their classroom.

I looked outside the staffroom. Kids sat on the floor, waiting for my mother.

‘Help me with enrolment. Villagers don’t like sending kids to school,’ my mother said.

‘But Ma, I want to teach as well,’ I said.

‘There’s lots of other work. Tarachand ji is hopeless at paperwork.’

‘Sounds boring.’

‘It’s important. I need someone to keep records and lobby with the authorities. I don’t have the energy.’

I took a deep breath and nodded. Like the school, my mother was turning old and weak.

‘Ma, can’t we pay for some of these repairs?’ I said.

My mother looked at me. I knew the answer from her expression.

‘I try to give what I can. We hardly have money to repair the haveli. You were studying in Delhi, so I had that expense. Don’t have much.’

I felt guilty. I wondered if I could have served my mother better by accepting that HSBC job. At least I could have sent her a cheque every month.

‘We manage. Don’t worry. I’m happy you’re here,’ my mother said, reading my mind.

‘How?’ I said.

‘I take no salary. I pay the staff. If something breaks down I pay for it. Beyond that, it is difficult. The government is supposed to aid us. They don’t.’

‘What about what we earn from the fees?’

‘It’s nothing. The fee is five rupees a month. Even then, many students don’t pay on time. If we are lucky, the fee covers the electricity bill.’

The noise levels in the corridor increased. A cacophony of conversation, laughter and screaming drowned our conversation, ‘Look at them. Noisy monkeys. I better go,’ my mother said. She walked out.

The difference between seventy kids on their own and seventy kids with a teacher can be immense. In an instant, the class fell silent.

I spent the rest of the morning reading all the files and documents related to the school. I quickly realized that running a school of seven hundred with a staff of four is no joke.

‘Okay, start counting in English,’ my mother shouted outside.

‘One, two, three...’ the kids chanted in unison. I didn’t know whether these kids from the village would ever use their knowledge of English numerals. Still, watching them learn something felt good. It felt better than watching a movie at a Delhi multiplex. It felt better than the posh party at Riya’s house.

‘From now on, these kids are my life,’ I told myself.

Six months later

'You promised, Sarpanch ji,' I said, using a hand fan to cool myself. I had come to his house a third time. Sarpanch Gopi, the man in charge of Aamva village, had assured me that every child in his village would come to school.

His wife brought us two glasses of lukewarm sattv, a roasted powder of pulses and lentils mixed in water. I wished it was a little cooler and less sweet, but drank it anyway.

The sixty-year-old sarpanch wore a greyish-white turban, matching his clothes.

'I thought they joined school. We sent eight children,' he said.

'They stopped coming after a week,'

'So what can I do, Rajkumar sahib? I tried.'

'You have to tell them to commit to it. School isn't like visiting the village fair. It takes years to get educated.'

'And what do they do with it?'

'Excuse me? It's almost free. Where is the problem?'

Gopi paused to look at me. He took out a beedi from his pajama pocket and lit it.

'Time. Their parents would rather the children help in the fields.'

'And what will they do when they grow up?'

'They will grow up only if they have food. They need to work in the fields for that.'

I fell silent. You can't win over villagers with an argument. You have to listen to what they have to say.

The sarpanch took a deep puff from his beedi.

'You studied in a big city?' he said.

'Yes. Why?'

'Big-city types never get it. Without knowing us they have all the

answers for us.'

'I am from here. You know that, Sarpanch ji.'

'I know, Rajkumar ji. But what do these poor farmer's kids do with the A-B--C and 1 -2-3 you teach them?'

'What do you mean?'

'A farmer sends his small child to school. Sounds great. But what does the school give him?'

'Education. What is he without education?'

'What will he do if, say, you make him an eighth-class-pass from Dumraon? Will he get a better job? More money? Nothing. It's a useless qualification. Here, he at least helps at home.'

'What is his future?' I said, confused about how to convince someone about something as basic as schooling.

'He has no future. Like his father, he will also work in the fields and try to survive. Schools are for rich people.'

I hung my head.

'Don't make the poor dream of having a future, Rajkumar ji. The schools you have don't help us get ahead in life. So we don't send our kids there. It's as simple as that. We are not village idiots who don't know better.'

I nodded. On the one hand I had to increase enrolments and, on the other hand, I couldn't fault his logic.

'Anything I can do to help you?' I asked as I stood up to leave. His own little grandkid lurked behind him, watching me with curiosity.

'Help us get water. Kids in the village walk two kilometres for it every day. If that ends, we will send them to school.'

*

Every politician's office always has people waiting outside. On a per-capita basis, netas meet more people than anyone in any other profession on earth. MLA Ojha's home-cum-office was packed. Groups of villagers sat outside on the veranda, each with a set of

complaints or demands. Pankaj, the MLA's secretary, offered to push me ahead in the queue. I declined. I had little interest in my entitlements as a fake prince.

The villagers waited silently. There is something about people with no hope for a better future in life. You can identify them from their expression. Most of all, it is in their eyes, which don't sparkle anymore. They aren't sad eyes. They are resigned eyes. The villagers had accepted that life would be what happened to them, not what they made of it. After all, this was rural Bihar. You can't decide one day to work hard and make it big in life. Nobody will let you. You have ramshackle schools that teach you how to read and write, but not help you make it in life. Even if you did educate yourself, you would find no jobs. What is the point of dreaming big? It is better to sit, wait and retire from life.

'What have you come here for?' I asked one of the village elders.

'Power. We get it one hour a day in our village, Bastipur. Not enough to pump water. We want to ask for two more hours.'

That's it. The man wanted three hours of power in twenty-four hours. And even for that he had to wait to meet his leaders with folded hands. There must be millions of Indians like this, I thought. A lot more than those who attend sushi parties on Aurangzeb Road, for instance.

I waved a bunch of flies away. Pankaj came up to me.

'Come, Ojha sir doesn't like it that you're waiting outside,' Pankaj said.

'I'm fine, really,' I said.

Ojha came out of his office. 'You're sitting on the floor?' he said, surprised.

'Like everyone else,' I said.

He looked around. 'Enough now, just come in, Madhavji,' he said.

We sat in the MLA's living room. His wife brought me orange juice.

'You should have just walked in,' he said.

'I didn't want the villagers to think you give me preferential

treatment,' I said.

'Now the villagers will say that I made the prince of Dumraon sit on the floor. Trust me, they care more about class than fairness. Anyway, what brings you here?'

'I need help for my school. And some hand pumps for the nearby villages.'

'Your school I can understand,' Ojha said as he raised his eyebrows just a little, 'but hand pumps for villages?'

'Yes. In Aamva.'

'You're turning into a social worker? Or entering politics?'

'None of those. The kids are not allowed to go to school. They have to walk two kilometres to fill water. More hand pumps in villages, more enrolment in my school.'

'Ah,' the MLA said as he finished his glass of orange juice. 'Thank God.'

He burst into laughter. I sat there, puzzled, 'If you join politics, my job is in danger,' he guffawed.

'Don't worry, I will not. Also, my school needs help.'

'I know. Your mother told me. It needs repairs worth lakhs. Unfortunately, it is not a government-run school.'

'But it is the only option for our kids.'

'You want something to eat? My wife made pakoras.'

I shook my head.

'If you could help with the school,' I said, as he interrupted me.

'Rajkumar ji, ..'

'Madhav. Please call me Madhav.'

'Okay. Madhav ji. See, my MLA funds are limited. I have to repair roads, fix power and install hand pumps. In fact, I have already run out.'

'How about the state education ministry?'

Ojha laughed. His laugh gave away the answer, 'It's Bihar. You should know,' he said.

'So you can't do anything?'

‘You want a personal donation from me? I am a humble government servant,’ he said.

‘No, that is not what I came for. I felt the local government should support the only proper school in the area, Parents of these kids vote for you.’

‘They do. However, they also have other, more important issues they want me to focus on.’

I stood up to leave,

‘You sure you don't want to try the pakoras?’

*

An angry Rani Sahiba is not a pretty sight. I sat at the dining table, eating pulao and raita for dinner.

‘Sit,’ I said.

‘Stand up,’ she said, her voice calm; too calm, in fact.

I flicked the rice from my fingers and stood up.

‘What happened?’ I said.

‘I'm allowing you to help out in the school. It doesn't mean you tin whatever you want.’

‘What did I do?’ I said.

‘You went to meet that arrogant MLA without telling me?’

‘I thought he might help. We can't run the school without toilets forever.’

‘Him? He wants the royal family to look bad.’

‘Why?’

‘How else will he look good?’

I kept quiet.

‘Sit,’ my mother said.

We both sat down, facing each other at the dining table. The huge dining-cum-living room was eerily silent as she spooned some rice on to her plate.

‘What did he say, anyway?’ she said.

‘He said he had no money left from his fund.’

‘Because he ate it all up,’ my mother said. ‘Sometimes I wish I had

not declined the ticket.'

'What ticket?'

'His party had asked me to contest last time. Why do you think Ojha is so insecure about our family?'

'Contest elections? You didn't tell me.'

'Well,' my mother said, 'I wasn't interested. And did you have time in Delhi to listen to your mother?'

'I was studying, Ma,'

'Or playing basketball'

The mention of basketball, without any warning, made me go blank.

'But you never really listened to me even when you called. Wonder what kept you so distracted there, No girl and all, no?'

I kept quiet.

'Was there?' she said and laughed. 'Can't imagine you having a girlfriend.'

'Pass me the raita,' I said.

'Say, no, if there was someone.'

I shook my head.

'What?'

'Nobody.'

'You sure? Why have you become all quiet?' my mother said.

'I miss the game. You mentioned basketball. I haven't played in a long time.'

'So go play. Go to Raj High School, people still play there.'

I nodded.

'In fact,' my mother said, 'you could even...'

She turned silent mid-sentence.

'Even what?'

'Nothing.'

'Say it.'

'Was going to say you could even teach the kids at school. But... '

'We don't have a court. Or the money for it,' I said, my voice

irritated.

‘So I didn’t mention it. Anyway, you go play. It’ll clear your head.’

‘My head is fine.’

‘See how you talk to your mother? If your head was fine, you wouldn’t have gone to the MLA.’

‘I just wanted to help.’

‘Enough. Eat your food.’

My mother still treated me as if I was ten years old. The funny thing was, I let her.

I reached the Raj High School playground at 6 in the evening. I saw a few teenage students on court. We smiled as we acknowledged each other. I asked for the ball. A student passed it to me. I was touching the dusty and dotted-rubber texture of the ball after ages. I took a shot.

Chhaak. The soft sound of the ball going through the net without touching the ring told me I still had it in me.

A few students clapped.

'Where's St. Stephen's?' one boy said. He had noticed my college T-shirt.

I looked at the boy. He seemed clueless about my fancy college. I had been like him not too long ago. I told him about my alma mater.

'English college?' he said.

'Completely. That too high-class English,' I said and laughed.

'I will never make it.'

'I entered through the sports quota. Maybe you can too.'

I dribbled the ball. The thumping sound matched my heartbeat.

'I'm not that good,' he said.

I threw the ball at him. He caught it reflexively.

'Let's see. I'm Madhav, by the way.'

'Parth,' he said and dribbled the ball.

I tackled him as he ran across the court. He was good, but not experienced. It took me twenty seconds to take the ball back from him. I took a shot even though the ring was quite far. I missed. Parth collected the ball and took a shot. He scored. I high-fived him.

The last of the sunlight fell on the court. It cast long shadows of the already tired players, I stared at the darting shadows, unable to focus on the game.

'What?' Parth said, He had scored another basket.

'Nothing,' I said, blinking rapidly.

He passed me the ball. I caught it by habit, still lost in thought. I

wondered if they had basketball courts in London. I was pretty sure they did. I wondered if she still played. And If she did, did she think of me?

‘Shoot, bhaiya,’ Parth said.

I threw the ball. It not only missed the basket, but also the entire frame. My laziest and worst shot ever.

Parth looked at me, shocked.

‘What level did you play, bhaiya?’ Parth said. His hopes of joining Stephen’s went up. If someone as sloppy as me could get in through sports quota, so could he.

I smiled at him, I ran across to pick the ball. I took a shot. I missed again. I passed the ball back to Parth, ‘I guess I’m not much of a player anymore,’ I said.

‘Should I call my other friends? We can play a game,’

I shook my head.

‘I’ll just bring down your level,’ I said and left the court.

*

‘Why has the MLA called us? This can’t be good,’ my mother said.

‘Let’s find out. Why are you getting so stressed?’

My mother and I walked from our house to MLA Ojha’s residence, ‘Useless fellow,’ Ma said.

‘Shh, we’re here,’ I said as we entered the compound of Ojha’s bungalow.

*

A freshly shaved Ojha in a sparkling white kurta-pajama received us with folded hands.

‘What an honour, Rani Sahiba,’ he said, beaming.

‘You ordered us to come. What choice do we have, Ojha ji?’ my mother said.

‘It was a humble request, Rani Sahiba,’ Ojha said. We followed him to his huge living room and took our seats on red velvet solas with huge gold embroidered flowers. His dutiful wife, her head covered, arrived with a tray of water and juice, My mother took the

tray from her. Mrs Ojha touched my mother's feet, 'Bless you, Kusum,' my mother said, Kusum scurried back into the kitchen and brought back a tray of snacks comprising laddoos, kaju kadi, bhujia and almonds.

'Please don't be formal,' my mother said.

Ojha sat on the sofa across us, a fixed grin on his face. 'Rajkumar ji came to me for assistance. I'm sorry but I explained my helplessness,' he said.

'We understand,' my mother said.

'Well, I have a proposal. You can help me. In return, maybe something can be done for the school.'

'Is it legal?' my mother said.

Ojha laughed hard. His plate shook in his hands,

'Nothing like that at all. In fact, a chance to make Dumraon and your school proud.'

Mother and I waited. Ojha put his plate down. 'Frankly, it's a big headache for me. I need your help as I'm stuck,'

'What's the matter?' my mother said.

'Have you heard of Bill Gates?'

'Bilgate? No. Is it a place?' my mother said.

'No, a person. Some videshi who makes computers or something.'

'Mr Bill Gates, chairman of Microsoft. They make computer software,' I said.

My mother and Ojha looked at me as if I were a genius, 'You know this person?' my mother said.

'The richest guy on earth,' I said.

'Yes, that's what I have heard, He has lots of money,' Ojha said,

'Sixty billion dollars,' I said, 'How much?' Ojha said.

'Two lakh forty thousand crore rupees,' I said.

Ojha's eyebrows went up an inch.

'What?' my mother said. 'So much? And how do you know all this?'

'Read it in a magazine. It's common knowledge, Ma,' I said.

‘Hmm... Mr Ojha. You were saying?’ my mother said,
‘Well, this Gates is coming to India, To Bihar, in fact.’

‘Has he gone mad? He makes so much money so he can come visit Bihar?’ she said.

Ojha laughed. ‘I don’t know much, Rani Sahiba. He has some NGO. They are bringing him here,’

‘Why?’

‘Maybe he will see the interiors of Bihar and feel richer.’

My mother and Ojha laughed. Ojha left the room and came back with a letter. He handed it to me. The letter had come from the state ministry of rural welfare: *To all MLAs/District Collectors/DCPs, The state ministry of rural welfare is pleased to inform that eminent entrepreneur and philanthropist Mr Bill Gates will be visiting Bihar along with delegates from the Gates Foundation from 15 April to 22 April 2009. The state government would like to extend its support to his team. In that regard, request your good offices to provide all cooperation as needed. Suggestions for places Mr Gates could visit or any events he could grace as chief guest on his week-long trip to Bihar are welcome and encouraged.*

Please contact the relevant officials in the rural welfare ministry with any queries or suggestions.

Signed,

Bhanwar Lai

Minister for Rural Welfare State Government of Bihar

The other side of the page carried the Hindi translation of the same letter.

‘So how can we help you?’ my mother said, after reading it herself. ‘Rani Sahiba, if Bill Gates comes here, my constituency will be in the news. Will be good for Dumraon.’

‘You will get press coverage. The minister will give you a pat on the back. Say that, Ojha ji,’ my mother said.

He couldn’t suppress a smile,

‘Well, that too,’ he said. ‘But ultimately it is good for our town.’

My mother knew the political game. Ojha wanted a Lok Sabha ticket in the next election. He had to do things to get noticed.

‘What exactly would you like us to do?’ I said,

‘Organise a school function. Invite him as the chief guest. Through me, of course. I’ll ask the ministry to put the school visit on his agenda.’

‘No. no, no...’ Ma threw up her hands in the air.

‘What, Rani Sahiba?’ Ojha said.

‘I can barely run the school. I don’t have the resources to organize a function. Who will pay for the arrangements?’

‘We will,’ Ojha said promptly. ‘I will pay for the function.’

‘I thought you didn’t have any funds,’ I said.

The MLA looked at me.

‘See, son, I am trying to help you. But there has to be something in it for me.’

‘So you pay for the function. People come, attend and leave. What do we get in return?’ I said.

‘Your school’s name will be in every paper,’ he said.

‘We don’t need publicity, we need toilets,’ I said.

‘We will arrange some makeshift toilets for the day.’

‘Exactly. You are only interested in that day. What about us after that?’

My mother stood up to leave.

‘We will whitewash the school for you,’ Ojha said.

I looked at my mother. Perhaps there was something here.

‘Toilets?’ I said.

‘Over there,’ Ojha said pointed to a door in the right corner.

‘No, I don’t want to use the toilet. I meant, what about the school toilets?’

‘That’s a big project. The school doesn’t have plumbing. Everything needs to be done from scratch. Too expensive and too little time to do that.’

‘That is what we need. Toilets, electricity and a new roof,’ my

mother said.

‘For just one function I can’t justify so much. I will whitewash the school, make all the arrangements for the function.’

‘Sorry, MLA ji,’ my mother said.

We walked out of the house. The MLA called me aside.

‘Think about it,’ he whispered in my ear. ‘Rani Sahiba never trusts me. But you know how important this Gates is. A lot of important people will come.’

I walked up to my mother.

‘Let’s do it,’ I said.

‘Who’ll do all the work?’ she said.

‘I will. Don’t you want a whitewash?’

She looked at me.

‘Please, Ma.’

She gave a brief nod.

‘Okay?’ I said.

‘This is the first time I’ve seen a sparkle in your eye since you came back. So yes, okay.’

I gave Ojha a thumbs up.

I prepared a proposal for Ojha as per his directions. We proposed Bill Gates make a visit to a self-run, not-for-profit school. We would celebrate the annual day of the Dumraon Royal School with Mr Gates as chief guest. The MLA forwarded the proposal to the rural ministry.

‘They have ninety requests,’ Ojha said, ‘and he can only visit ten places during his trip. So they will shortlist and let us know.’

‘I didn’t realize there would be so much competition,’ I said, surprised.

‘I’m going to Patna tomorrow. Come with me and I’ll introduce you to the ministry people. You can persuade them.’

I accompanied the MLA in his lal-batti car on the three-hour ride to Patna. We reached the state government offices. I met Mr Shyam Kaushal, a middle-aged official in the rural welfare ministry, in his dusty office. He wore a grey safari suit that I think all government employees get free with their offer letters.

‘Headache. This whole Gates trip is a headache,’ he said and held his head.

He showed me the file of requests. Alongside, another fat file contained press requests for interviews, communication with the foundation and papers on various official government functions being planned.

‘Why do we go crazy over these white guys visiting India?’ Mr Kaushal said.

‘Because of this white guy, my school will get a whitewash,’ I said. ‘Do you speak good English?’ he said. ‘Because they will call you many times.’

‘I manage,’ I said.

‘Manage means what? When he comes, who will talk to him?’

‘I will.’

‘What will he see in your annual day? It’s a Hindi-medium school. The entire programme will be in Hindi, right?’

I kept quiet.

‘See.’ He opened the file. ‘There is this school in Patna that really wants him. They will do a skit in English for him. About the invention of computers and the role of Microsoft.’

I saw the request. It had come from the Delhi Public School in Patna.

‘This is an English-medium school. He can find this anywhere. What’s so Bihari about it?’ I said.

‘Well, it is convenient. We can take him to DPS straight from Patna airport.’

‘Mr Kaushal, I think Mr Gates wants to see the real Bihar. The posh English school you will take him to means nothing.’

‘So what to do?’

‘Bring him to Dumraon Royal. Don’t worry, we will do a dance or something without words.’

Mr Shyam Kaushal remained hesitant. Government employees are the lowest risk-takers on earth.

Finally, he shook his head. ‘Something needs to be there in English. His team has told us. They want Mr Gates to engage with the event.’

‘Okay, we’ll do something in English.’

‘What?’

‘I’ll figure it out,’ I said.

A knock on the door startled us. MLA Ojha came in. Mr Kaushal stood up automatically. Government employees have a servile switch in their brains. It makes them grovel in the presence of netas.

‘Listen to us poor Dumraon people at least once, Kaushal ji,’ Ojha said.

Mr Kaushal folded his hands. ‘Trying, Ojha sahib. Goras want to see the real Bihar but in English. I’m going crazy.’

Ojha slapped my back.

‘Rajkumar ji went to the best English college in India. He will handle them well.’

I smiled. I did go to the best English college, but my English still, well, sucked.

*

My cell phone rang in the middle of a maths class. The call came from an unknown number. The class III students looked at me. I held a chalk in one hand and the phone in the other. I cut the call and continued to teach.

'Twenty-three multiplied by twelve,' I wrote on the squeaky blackboard.

The phone rang again.

'Do this sum, I'll be right back,' I said and stepped out of class.

'Is this Mr Madhav Jha?' asked a female voice in an unfamiliar accent when I picked up the call.

'Yes,' I said.

'This is Samantha Myers from the Bill Gates Foundation, calling from New Delhi.'

'What?' I said. I tried to figure out her words despite the strange accent. 'Hello. Myself Madhav. What can I do for you?'

I kicked myself for saying 'myself Madhav'.

'I am part of Mr Gates's advance party. We would like to inspect your school before we decide our itinerary.'

She spoke so fast I couldn't understand most of what she said.

'Yes, Mr Bill Gates. Is he coming?'

I had not had any update since my visit to Patna a week ago.

'Well, I need to visit you first.'

*

'Your school is...' Samantha paused as she hunted for the right word.

'Not in great condition?' I said.

I had taken her on a school tour.

The plaster was coming off the walls. The noise of kids repeating mathematical tables drowned out our conversation. Students peeped out of classroom windows. They stared at the alien creature with

golden hair and white skin.

‘No. I wanted to say quaint.’

‘Quaint?’ I said. I didn’t understand the word.

‘Different. Different in a charming sort of way.’

I failed to understand the charm of a school with leaky roofs and furniture that was falling apart. White people think differently, I guess.

We came to the staffroom. She greeted my mother and the other teachers. Tarachand ji brought us two cups of tea. Samantha noticed the damp walls.

‘We will whitewash everything. The local government has assured us,’ I said.

‘Yeah, that is fine. Can we sit outside? I’d love to get some sun,’ Samantha said.

We walked out, carrying a classroom chair each. We sat in the fields facing the school entrance. The February sun felt warm. It made Samantha’s golden hair shine even more. She was pretty. Why had she left the comforts of her own country to roam dusty villages in India?

‘This is gorgeous,’ she said, looking at the rice crops sway in the air.

‘Mr Gates will like it? We can arrange the annual-day function in the fields.’

‘Oh, I’m sure he will.’

‘We’re a little short on funds. But we will do our best to put up a good show.’

‘Sure. Are there enough toilets for the dignitaries?’

‘Well,’ I said, wondering what to say. In some ways, the entire field was available as a toilet.

‘Western-style toilets, I meant.’ Samantha laughed. ‘Most of the delegation is from the US.’

‘We will have temporary ones put up,’ I said.

‘You don’t have them at the school?’

I looked at her. She seemed more curious than judgemental. I decided to be honest.

‘We are a poor school. We don’t have the money to do many things. We are doing this to get noticed so some government officials might help us.’

Samantha frowned.

‘We will, however,’ I said, ‘do a good show. The local MLA is with us.’

‘I believe you will. Since you mentioned lack of funds, would you like to be considered for our grants programme?’ Samantha said.

‘What’s that?’

‘Our foundation gives grants, or a sum of money, to deserving social projects. We had you as a tourist stop for Mr Gates, but you are doing social service, too.’

‘Well, it is service for us. My mother has given her entire life to this school. Even I turned down job offers to come here,’

‘Great. You can make a pitch for that, too.’

‘Pitch?’

‘The grants programme is highly competitive. We get a lot of wonderful proposals, but give funding to only a few.’

‘What do I need to do?’

‘Ideally, you need to submit a proposal and make a presentation to the selection panel. However, there’s no panel meeting expected anytime in the near future.’

‘Then?’

Samantha paused to think.

‘Please, Miss Samantha, I really need money for my school. You have seen the condition it is in’

Samantha finally spoke. ‘Here's what I suggest. Make a good speech to the visiting delegation. Mr Gates himself will be present. If he and the delegation like what you say, they may grant you something on the spot.’

Really?’

‘If you can say something inspiring, a pitch that comes across as genuine, a small grant might be possible.’

What's a small grant?’

‘Twenty thousand dollars. Maybe more. But like I said, it may not work.’

I let out a huge breath. Eight lakhs could transform my school.

‘A speech, eh?’ I said.

‘Yes, not too preachy, not salesy. just from the heart.’

‘How long?’

‘Five to ten minutes. In English, of course.’

‘What?’ I said and jumped up from my chair. My sudden movement caused her to spill her tea.

‘Sorry? Everything okay?’ Samantha said.

I sat back down.

‘English?’

‘Yes. But we are speaking in English.’

‘I can barely talk to you. Addressing a US delegation in English in front of an audience? I can’t.’

‘Well, we could have translators. But I’m afraid that just doesn’t have the same effect.’

We finished tea. She called her driver. Kids continued to stare from the classroom windows at the white princess in her white Innova.

‘My English is terrible,’ I said to her. She got into the car.

‘It’s completely your choice.’

The driver started the car. I continued to stare into Samantha’s grey eyes.

‘So?’ she said.

‘I’ll do it,’ I said and inhaled deeply. ‘I will make a speech in English.’

My heartbeat was louder than the car’s engine.

‘Nice. Look forward to it. See you in April,’ she said coolly.

The car zoomed off. I stood still, wondering why on earth I had agreed to give a speech to the richest man on the planet.

'Speech?' my mother said. 'In English? To goras? Have you gone mad?'

'The state of the school has driven me mad.'

She sat up on her rickety chair, her eyebrows high. She rested her elbows on the table, her fingers entwined.

'Whatever it is, it is my school, If you don't like it, leave.'

'Don't be dramatic, Ma. I like it, so I'm doing all this.'

'First, I have no idea who this Gates is or what he does to make so much money. Next, he is coming to my school with a paltan, Now you have to give a speech.'

'He makes software,'

'Soft wear? Like soft clothes? So much money from that?'

'No, computer software. Like Windows,'

'Windows. Gates. What is he? A furniture dealer?'

'Forget it, Ma, I have to practise my English speech,'

'Good luck,'

She slid a stack of students' notebooks towards herself, She opened one and started to correct it.

'I want you to help me.'

She looked up,

'How? I don't speak English. Barely understand it.'

'Please let me know if I sound okay,'

I stood up straight, I pretended I had a mic in my hand.

'How will I know if you said it right?' Ma said, 'Imagine yourself in the audience. See if I come across as confident and intelligent,'

She giggled, I shushed her and began my speech. As I didn't know English well then, this is what I came up with.

'Good morning, Mr Bill Gates, Miss Samantha and guests. I, Madhav, welcoming you all to the Bihar, My school doing excellent coaching of children, farmer's children, poor children, small children...' I couldn't think of what to say next so I referred to various

kinds of children, I continued, '...boy children, girl children, and many, many children,'

I heard my mother snigger.

'What?' I said,

'Who are all these children?' if scratched my head.

'Anyway,' I continued. 'My school needing toilet as nobody able to toileting when toilet time corning,'

My mother burst out laughing.

'Now it's toilet,' she said. I gave her a dirty look.

'Please go on.,' she said, enjoying herself. I threw up my hands in the air.

'I'm useless. What have I taken on?' I went into panic mode. I was going to turn myself into a joke.

'Can you say no?' my mother said.

'I can. Maybe I should. Should I?'

My mother shrugged. I sat down next to her.

'I will tell them I can't do it. They can take me off the grants programme.'

'Quitting, eh?' she said.

'You laughed at me. Now you are calling me a quitter.'

'I only laughed at your current speech. You can learn to give a better one.'

'How?'

'How much time do you have?'

'Two months.'

'So learn English'

'I didn't learn it properly in three years at St. Stephen's. How can I do it in two months?'

'We don't quit, Madhav. It's not in the Jha family's genes.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning we may lose everything, but we don't quit. That's what your uncles did, at the gambling table or in business. Being bankrupt is okay, but quitting is not.'

‘So what do I do?’

‘You work that out. I have to take a class.’

My mother collected her notebooks and left.

Half an hour later, I stomped into her classroom. The students looked up at me.

‘Don’t barge in when class is on. Wait outside,’ she said and shoed me out.

She came out when the period ended.

‘I’m going for it,’ I said.

‘Good,’ my mother said. ‘But next time, knock.’

‘I want to join English classes. In Patna.’

‘Patna?’

‘There’s nothing good in Dumraon.’

‘That’s true. But how?’

‘I’ll commute. Weekdays here and Patna on the weekends. Is that okay?’

‘Where will you stay in Patna?’

‘I’ll find some place.’

‘We have relatives. Your chachi stays there. She is one weird woman, though.’

‘I’ll find a guest house. Let me look for good classes there.’

‘Come here.’ My mother gave me a tight hug.

‘Just stay happy, all right?’ she said. ‘Do what you have to, but don’t be a grumpy man like your father.’

‘Thank you, Ma,’ I said.

‘Welcome, English boy.’

'Six thousand for three months.' He pushed a brochure towards me.

I had come to Patna's Pride English Learning Centre on Boring Road. M, Shaqif, the thin, almost malnourished owner of Patna's Pride, explained the various courses to me. He wore a purple shirt. Sunglasses hung out of his front pocket.

'We teaching for five years. Good English. Personality development, interview preparing, everything people learning here,'

I was no expert in English, but I could still tell there was something wrong with what he had said. One too many 'ings', 'I have to give a speech. To an important audience,' I spoke in Hindi, to explain my situation better, 'No problem. Speech okay,' Shaqif said. 'What qualification you having?'

'Graduate.'

'Good. Local?'

'Delhi. St, Stephen's.'

The name didn't register. He nodded out of courtesy. He rummaged in a drawer, took out an admission form and handed it to me. I wondered if I should pay up or check out other classes. He sensed my hesitation.

'Sir, we will make you top-class. Multinational-company English.'

'I only have two months,' I said. 'I need fast results,'

'We arrange private classes for you. Extra five hundred per class.'

'Five hundred?'

'Okay, four hundred,'

I shook my head.

'Three hundred. Please. Good deal,' he said.

I filled up the form and paid him an advance for the first month. In addition, I signed up for private classes every Saturday and Sunday, I left Patna's Pride and took an auto to a road outside the railway station, full of guest houses. I finally struck a weekends-only deal with a small

hotel called Nest, provided I didn't ask for a receipt, *

Ten minutes into my first class at Patna Pride, I had a sinking feeling.

This wouldn't work. I shared the classroom with fifteen other students, mostly around my age and all men. The teacher asked us to call him 'Verma sir'.

'Say "how",' Verma sir said, asking the class to repeat the word.

'How.' The response came in ten different accents. The word sounded like 'haw' or 'haau' or 'ho'.

'Are.You.' Verma sir said, 'How are you?'

The class repeated the words with a Bihari twist.

'Confidence,' Verma sir said, 'is the secret. It is the key difference in coming across as high-class English or low class. You have to sound right, too. This is a foreign language. Not Bhojpuri. So the sounds are different.'

He turned to a student called Amit, 'Why are you here, Amir?'

'To learn English, sir,' Amit said.

'What kind of English?'

'Top-class English. With big vocabulary,'

'Relax,' Verma sir said. 'Forget big vocabulary in my class,'

'Sir?' Amit said, confused.

Verma sir turned and addressed the whole class, 'Students, all you have to learn is simple, confident English. Don't be scared of people who use big words. These are elitists. They want to scare you with their big words and deny you an entry into the world of English. Don't fall into their trap. Okay?'

Everyone nodded, irrespective of whether they understood Mr Verma or not, 'Anyway, let's get back to "how are you",' he said.

Verma sir explained the 'au' sound in the word 'hew' and that it did not exist in Hindi.

'Like cow, It is not ca-u, It is a mix of aa and o together. Try,'

The class struggled to utter the simple word. I bet the British would have struggled just as hard if they tried to speak Bhojpuri. If the

Industrial Revolution had taken place here, there would be Indian ex-colonies around the world. White men would have had to learn Hindi to get a decent job. White teachers would tell white men how to say cow in Hindi with a perfect accent.

Verma sir interrupted my desi-invasion daydream.

'Yes, what is your name?'

'Madhav, Madhav Jha, sir.'

'Okay, Madhav, repeat after me: "I am fine, thank you".'

'I am fine, thank you,' I said.

'Good,' he said.

After three years at Stephen's, I wasn't that hopeless. I could repeat simple phrases. I wanted him to teach me how to give a speech. Meanwhile, he moved on and corrected another student.

'Faa-in. Not fane. Please open your mouth more.'

*

I spent the weekend in Patna. Apart from attending the classes, I bought a book on confident public speaking from the Patna Railway Station. I ate puri-aloo from a platform stall. The book recommended practising English with random strangers, so one would feel less ashamed if one made a mistake.

'Excuse me, sir. Would you be kind enough to tell me if this is the platform for the Kolkata Rajdhani Express?'

I practised this sentence on the station platform ten times. In many cases, the passengers didn't understand me. I moved towards the AC compartments. Rich people usually know English.

'I'm not sure. I suggest you ask the TC,' said one bespectacled man.

'Was my English correct?' I said.

'Huh?' he looked at me, surprised.

I explained my attempts at English practice. He patted my back.

'You did fine,' he said.

'I'm trying,' I said. 'Your English is so good. What do you do?'

'I'm in software sales. I'm Sudhir.' He extended his hand.

‘I’m Madhav,’ I said.

‘All the best, Madhav,’ he said.

*

Private classes seemed much better at Patna’s Pride. I explained my situation to Verma sir.

‘I see,’ he said. He stroked his chin stubble. ‘Not only do you have to learn correct English, you have to also learn to deliver a public speech,’

‘Exactly, sir. I am so nervous.’

“But you do know some English. You graduated English-medium, right?”

I wanted to tell him I didn’t just graduate English-medium, graduated from a place where even the grass grows in English.

I switched to Hindi to explain myself. ‘Sir, I can put a sentence together in English. But all my effort goes into remembering the right words. I can’t think of what I’m saying.’

‘I understand.’ Verma sir said. ‘When you don’t know the language well, you are self-conscious. It shows in your confidence level. It affects your personality. Not good for job interviews.’

‘Sir, this isn’t just a job interview. This is about the future of my school and the students who study there.’

I showed Verma sir the book I had brought from the railway station.

He shook his head. ‘No, not this. You don’t learn how to become a confident English speaker from books found at a railway station. Else the whole country would be by now.’

‘Please help me, sir,’ I said.

Verma sir became silent.

‘Why are you quiet?’ I asked, worried his silence meant I was a hopeless case.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘I’m wondering how to go about this.’

‘Should I quit?’ I said.

He shrugged. My heart sank.

‘Give it a few weeks. We can decide then. Now stand up and speak your fears out loud.’

‘Fears?’

"Yes, open up and face them. In English.’

I stood in front of the empty classroom. Verma sir took one of the student’s seats.

‘Hi, I am Madhav Jha, and I have a fear of speaking in English.’

‘Good. And?’

‘I have a fear that my school will not manage itself and close down.’

‘Go on. One more fear.’

‘I have a fear that I will never be able to get over someone I loved deeply.’

I returned to Dumraon after my Patna weekend and resumed duties at the school. I also coordinated with MLA Ojha's office for the whitewash.

Later in the week I sat with a paint contractor in the staffroom. My phone buzzed.

'Madhav? Hi, this is Samantha from the Foundation.'

'How are you, Samantha?' I said, pronouncing the words just right, as Verma sir would have liked.

'I am great. How are the preparations going?'

'We are working on it,' I said slowly.

'Super. Listen, two of my colleagues are in Patna later this week. I think you should meet them.'

I tried hard to understand Samantha's words, given their breakneck speed.

'Meet whom?'

'My seniors from the New York office. They have a say in grants. You should network with them.'

'Network?'

English is hard enough to decode, but when these Americans speak it, it is impossible.

'Get to know them. Can you come?'

'I am in Patna on weekends anyway.'

'How about Saturday then? We have field visits later, but you can meet us for breakfast.'

'Sure,' I said.

'We will be at the Chanakya Hotel. Eight o'clock?'

'Eight is fine.'

'See you on Saturday,' she said and hung up.

The paint contractor looked at me in awe. I had managed an entire conversation in English.

'What?' I said to him.

He shook his head and took out the shade card.

*

I entered the Chamkva lobby at 7.47 a.m. I mention the exact time because it changed my life. A minute earlier or later and things would have been different. Samantha and her colleagues entered the hotel lobby at 7.51.

‘This is Chris and that’s Rachel,’ Samantha said. I shook hands with the newb who wanted to help the poor.

‘Breakfast?’ Samantha said.

We entered the hotel coffee shop at 7.55. The breakfast buffet consisted of over twenty dishes. I loaded my plate with toast, porridge, fruit, paranthas, poha and idlis. I ordered a masala dosa at the live cooking counter.

‘Madhav here runs a village school,’ Samantha said. She nibbled at her jam and butter toast.

‘You look really young,’ Chris said, opening a bottle of mineral water.

‘It’s my mother’s school. I help out,’ I said.

I told them about the Dumraon Royal School.

‘Seven hundred children, negligible fee, no state support. Amazing,’ Chris said.

‘I saw the school. The staff and owners are really dedicated. It’s sad they don’t have basic facilities or the funds to grow,’ Samantha said.

My American friends ate little; the buffet was wasted on them.

I refilled my plate thrice. I wanted to eat enough so I didn’t need food the entire day. We finished breakfast at 8.27 a.m.

‘We better get going. Our project is in Monger. Four hours away,’ Samantha said. ‘You mean Munger?’ I said.

‘Hey, sorry, I murder the names of places here,’ Samantha giggled. *I have murdered English all my life*, I wanted to say.

We stood up to leave, Samantha and Rachel collected their handbags. Chris called the driver.

I looked around. I wondered if I should have eaten some more.

That was when I spotted a tall girl, her back to me, at the other end of the coffee shop. Her long hair came down to her waist. She wore a mustard salwar-kameez. If she wasn't tall, I wouldn't have noticed her. If we had started breakfast a few minutes later, I would still be eating and wouldn't have noticed her. It had to be just that moment. At 8.29 a.m., when I stood up to leave, was exactly when she had stood up to leave as well. She picked some files from her table.

'Lovely meeting you, Madhav.' Chris said. He extended his hand.

I nodded, my eyes still on the girl, as I shook hands with him.

'All okay?' Chris said. He turned his head to see what had distracted me.

'Huh? Yeah, I am fine,' I said, my eyes still on the other end of the room.

She turned towards the exit. The waiter followed her to get a bill signed. She stopped and turned towards the waiter. I saw her face for half a second. Yes, it was her.

'Riya Somani,' I said.

'Who?' Chris said. Samantha and Rachel turned towards her, too.

Before any of us could react, Riya had left the restaurant.

'Is she someone famous?' Rachel said.

'Excuse me, I need to go,' I said. My fingers trembled as I shook Samantha's hand.

'Have a good trip to Munger,' I said.

'We'll see you soon in Dumraon,' Samantha said, her voice cheerful.

'Yeah,' I said absently. I walked towards the door. I wanted to run towards it but I didn't want to create a scene. I came to the lobby, but there was no sign of her.

Did I hallucinate? I asked myself. No, I had seen her. The walk, the gait, the face—there is only one Riya.

I rushed to the foyer and just about saw her leave in an Innova. She had sunglasses on. The car windows were rolled up.

‘Can I help you, sir?’ a young hotel staff member at the concierge desk asked me.

‘The lady who left just now. You saw her? Mustard salwar-kameez?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where did she go?’

‘We don’t know, sir. It’s a private taxi.’

‘Will she be back?’

‘Not sure, sir. Sorry. Is there a problem, sir?’

I shook my head. I walked back into the hotel, wondering what to do next.

I went to the coffee shop again and found the waiter.

‘You just gave a bill to a lady.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘She might be an old friend of mine. Can I see it?’

The waiter looked at me with suspicion.

‘I was just here with the foreigners. We sat there,’ I said, pointing to our table. If you are seen hanging out with white guys, people assume you are not a bad person.

The waiter went to the cash counter. He brought back the bill. I saw her signature. Yes, I had bumped into Riya Somani, after all.

‘231,’ the waiter said. ‘She signed the bill to her room.’

‘She is staying here?’ I said.

‘Of course,’ the waiter said. He looked at me as if I was a certified idiot.

I heaved a sigh of relief. I came to the reception and enquired about a guest named Riya in 231.

‘Yes, it is a company booking. She is here for a week.’

‘When will she come back?’

‘Can’t say, sir. If you leave your name and number we can ask her to contact you.’

I wasn’t sure if Riya would do that. If I had to meet her, I had no choice but to wait. I decided to skip my English classes. I sat in the

lobby, my eyes fixed on the entrance.

I waited for twelve hours.

I didn't allow myself to use the bathroom lest I miss her again. I didn't eat food or drink water all day either. My eyes scanned every car arriving at the hotel.

At seven in the evening, Samantha, Chris and Rachel returned from their trip. Their faces had turned black with Bihar's dust. They looked exhausted.

'Madhav?' Samantha said, surprised.

'Oh, hi,' I said, pretending to be equally astonished. 'I came for another meeting.'

'At Chanakya itself?' Samantha said.

I nodded. Chris said he needed a shower or he would die. They left me in the lobby and went up to their rooms.

At 8.30 p.m., an Innova pulled into the front porch. Riya stepped out of it. My heart started to play hopscotch. A part of me wanted to run away. It shuddered at the thought of facing her. Another part had made me sit here without a break for twelve hours.

She didn't notice me. She went up to the reception.

'231, please,' she said. The receptionist turned towards the key rack.

I walked up to the reception. 'Excuse me, which way is the coffee shop?' I said. I had to make it seem like she saw me first. That's Riya. She had to find me. If I found her, she might just run away.

'Oh my God,' Riya said. 'Madhav Jha.'

'Riya... Riya Somani, right?' I said.

'Wow, you have difficulty recollecting my name, Madhav Jha!'

'Riya Somani,' I said, giving up ah pretence of indifference. The receptionist seemed surprised at the happy coincidence right at her counter.

Riya took her keys and we stepped away from the counter.

'What are you doing here?' she said. 'Wow, I still can't get over it. Madhav Jha.'

‘I am a Bihari. This is Patna. My hometown is not far away. I should ask you what you are doing here.’

‘Work. My company sent me.’

‘Work?’

‘Yeah, you didn’t think I could work?’ Riya said.

‘No, nothing like that. What kind of work? You moved to London, right?’

Riya looked around the hotel lobby.

‘Let’s talk properly,’ she said. ‘You had dinner?’

‘No.’

‘Hungry?’

I could have eaten the flowers in the lobby at this point.

‘A little bit,’ I said.

‘Let’s go to the coffee shop.’

‘Okay, but can I use the toilet first?’ I said.

*

We entered the coffee shop. The waiter from the morning was still on duty. He gave me an all-knowing smile. I smiled back.

‘You found madam,’ he said. Ass, I thought.

‘What?’ Riya said.

‘Nothing. Yes, for me and madam. Table for two, please.’

We sat at a corner table and had our first meal together in three years. The effect some people's mere presence can have on you is indescribable. Everything on offer in the rather ordinary evening buffet tasted divine. The salty tomato soup was the best I had ever had. The matar-paneer tasted like an award-winning chef had made it. The lights from the traffic jam visible outside the window looked like fireflies. I kept silent, worried I would say something stupid to upset her or, worse, make her run away.

'You've become so quiet,' she said.

'Nothing like that,' I said. I looked at her. She looked, if possible, even more stunning than she had been in college.

'So, tell me, what have you been up to?' she said.

Over the next ten minutes, I told her about my life since college.

'You run a school. And Bill Gates is visiting it,' she said. 'Wow.'

'He's visiting many places.'

'Come on, don't be modest. You are doing something so different from the rest of our batchmates.'

'I'm a misfit, I guess. Who leaves HSBC to come to Dumraon?' I said.

'Cool people,' Riya said. Our eyes met. I tried to read her, considering she had said so little about herself. I couldn't find anything too different, apart from a touch of maturity. I wanted to ask her about her past few years. However, I wouldn't push it.

'How's Rohan?' I said.

'You remember his name? So what was that "Riya, Riya Somani, right?" business in the lobby?'

I smiled. She had caught me red-handed.

'Rohan should be fine,' she said.

'Should be?'

'I don't know. He must be.'

'Rohan is your husband, right?'

She became quiet.

'You want anything sweet? They have kulfi and gulab jamun,' I said, desperate to change the topic.

'We got divorced,' she said in a calm voice, as if she had expressed her sweet-dish preference.

I didn't have anything to say. Apart from shock, I felt a warm tingle at the back of my neck.

Had I just felt happy at what she said? I clenched my teeth. I didn't want my smile to leak out.

Oh my God, that is the best news I have heard in years, a cheerful voice spoke inside my head. Even my soul jumped about in excitement.

I tried to look as serious as possible.

'That's terrible,' I said at last.

She nodded.

'Sweet dish?' I said in a soft voice. Well, the occasion did deserve something sweet.

She shook her head. She looked upset, on the verge of tears. I wanted to touch her hand, but I restrained myself.

'What happened?' I said, my tone as genuine as possible.

'I don't want to talk about it.'

I nodded. *Typical Riya*, I thought.

'Can we talk about something else, please?' she said.

'Yeah, sure. What?'

'Anything?'

'You want kulfi?' I said.

'No, Madhav, I don't want kulfi. Or anything else to eat. Can you talk about something else, please?'

I thought I had talked about something else. *Doesn't the topic of kulfi count as something else? Well, who can argue with girls?*

'How long are you in Patna for?' I said.

'My job is here. I have to find a place to live, actually.'

'Really? Which company do you work for?'

‘Nestle. I am in sales, for their yogurt brand.’

‘Ah,’ I said.

‘What?’ she said.

‘Nothing.’

‘In case you’re wondering what the hell I’m doing selling yogurt in Patna, well, it’s hard for a college dropout to find a job, isn’t it? Especially when the dropout wants to work on her own and not with her rich dad?’

‘I wasn’t wondering about that at all,’ I said. I really didn’t care why she was in Patna; I was only delirious with joy she was in Patna.

‘Anyway,’ she said, ‘when do you go back to Dumraon?’

‘You remember Dumraon?’ I said smilingly.

‘How can I forget the only prince I have ever known and his kingdom?’

She picked up a spoon and took a bite of my kulfi. I thought she didn’t want anything sweet.

Why do girls always do the opposite of what they say they want to do? She took more bites of the kulfi and ended up eating more of it than me.

‘Do you remember anything else, Riya?’

‘Like what?’

‘Us?’

She looked at me.

‘Madhav...’

‘Yes?’

‘I’ve changed, Madhav,’ she said. ‘In college I was an immature, over-protected, idiotic eighteen-year-old with no clue about life.’

‘We were all young back then,’ I said, jumping to her defence.

‘I am sorry, because I know I hurt you. The last two years have taught me a lot.’

Her unexpected apology startled me. I realized that I could be in love with this Riya even more than the previous one. ‘What actually happened?’

‘I’d rather not talk about it. At least, not now.’

I clucked impatiently.

‘What?’ she said.

‘Nothing. This is so you. The freezing up. I do know you, Riya, even if it was in the past.’

‘If you know me, why do you push?’

‘Who pushed? I met you after years, so asked you. However, I have no right to anymore. So, sorry, madam.’ I became silent.

‘Don’t be like that,’ she said.

I looked away and spoke again. ‘You shoved a wedding card in my hand and disappeared. I run into you after years and I shouldn’t ask you what happened?’

‘You should.’

‘That is what I did.’

‘Fine, I’m sorry. And I’ve already apologized for the past. Madhav, look at me.’

I turned my gaze back to her. I could only be mad at Riya for so long. She smiled. I maintained a stern expression.

‘Would you like to be friends with me?’ she said.

I hate it when she says that. What the fuck is that? Is it an invitation? Is it a consolation prize? Is it a peace treaty?

I remained silent.

‘I live in Patna. You come here often. We could be friends. Would you like that?’ she said.

That was another thing I hated. That I always let her decide when to be friends or when not to. I had no power to refuse her.

‘Yes, I would,’ I said.

‘Great. I would like us to be good friends, too,’ she said. ‘However, I have one condition.’

I rolled my eyes. There is always a catch with Riya. What is it going to be this time? Have no expectations?

‘Say it,’ I said.

‘Don’t ask me the same question twice.’

‘What?’

‘Ask me things. I will reply if and when I can. If I don’t, please don’t ask me again.’

‘Really?’ I said.

‘Yes. That is when it seems pushy.’

‘Fine. I don’t want to be pushy.’

‘Whenever you are in Patna we can meet up. Maybe you can show me the city.’

‘I am here this weekend.’

‘Sunday is my day off. I have some apartments to look at, though.’

‘Would you like me to come apartment-hunting with you?’ I said.

She fell silent. I had become too familiar too soon.

‘It’s okay. We can meet another time,’ I said quickly.

‘No, come. You are right. They will quote crazy rates to me otherwise.’

‘I wasn’t going to ask twice,’ I said and she laughed.

‘What time should I fix to meet with the broker?’ she said.

‘I have a morning class until eleven and then I’m free until four-thirty,’ I said.

‘Class?’ she said.

‘I’d rather not talk about it right now.’

She raised an eyebrow.

‘Really?’

‘Don’t ask the same question twice. Applies both ways, right?’

I heard her laugh again, the most beautiful sound in the world.

'Oh, I love this place,' she said. 'Look at the balcony.'

'Stop it. If you praise it so much, he will never give us a good price,' I said.

We were in an apartment close to Dak Bungalow Road in Indiranagar, an upscale and relatively quiet neighbourhood in noisy Patna.

After viewing many apartments smaller than the servant quarters of 100, Aurangzeb Road, we had finally stumbled upon the right one. It was a colonial apartment building with twelve-foot high ceilings. It had old teak windows and doors. Both the bedrooms had a sunny balcony facing a park. There was a spacious kitchen with a loft for storage. I knew Riya would take this place.

'Shhh,' she said and placed a finger on her lips.

'Twenty thousand,' the broker said, probably sensing our keenness.

'So much? Have you had bhaang?' I said.

'It is the safest area in Patna. Madam is staying alone. And look at the balconies,' the broker said.

'True, it is lovely,' Riya said dreamily.

I glared at her. She placed a hand on her mouth, as if to say 'oops'.

'Fifteen,' I said.

'This is a gora flat, sir. Foreigners like these old places. I am showing it to a firangi couple later today,' the broker said.

'We will take it. Done. Twenty,' Riya said.

I shrugged at Riya. She smiled at me. Rich kids think money grows like the rice in the fields of Dumraon.

*

'This is gorgeous,' Riya said. She took out her mobile phone and started to take pictures.

We had come to Gol Ghar, a giant round planetarium-shaped dome located opposite Gandhi Maidan. It had been built in 1784 as a granary when the British wanted a place to store grain to be used in times of

famine. I bought the two-rupee ticket for both of us.

‘You could have bargained. He would have agreed for eighteen thousand,’ I said.

‘I couldn’t let go of the place. I’m going to live there. It’s important,’ she said. She clicked a picture of the bronze plaque, which read: *For perpetual prevention of famine in this province This Granary Completed on 20th July 1786*

We climbed the steps that took us to the top of the dome. We saw wide green fields on one side and the clamour of the city on the other.

The dome walls were covered with paan stains, and couples’ names had been etched on the surface. Losers who think little before destroying a city’s heritage do this sort of stuff. There’s a reason why people say we Biharis are uncouth. Some people in my community work hard to earn us that tag.

‘If they clean this place up, it will be awesome,’ Riya said.

‘Yeah, the authorities don’t care,’ I said.

‘It’s not just the authorities. If the people cared, the authorities would care too,’ Riya said.

I nodded. Empty cigarette packets and peanut shells lay strewn all over the steps and on the floor.

‘This could be a really cool IMAX theatre.’

‘What’s that?’

She told me about IMAX theatres in London; they had screens four times the normal size.

I adjusted the heavy rucksack on my shoulder.

‘Books?’ she said.

I nodded. Her yellow-and-white dupatta fluttered in the breeze.

‘You want to know what classes I’m taking?’ I said.

‘I can’t ask you again,’ she said and smiled.

‘English. Spoken English.’

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘Do you really need them?’

‘Yes, on an urgent basis,’ I said.

We walked down the Gol Ghar steps. I told her how the Gates

Foundation people would arrive in six weeks and I had to deliver a speech.

‘No speech, no grant, eh?’ she said.

I nodded and hailed an auto. ‘Maurya Complex,’ I said to the driver.

*

Maurya Complex is a grey box-shaped building with retail stores on the ground level and offices on the higher floors. While the building has no character, its compound area has some of the most popular street food stalls of Patna.

‘Tried litti-chokha before?’ I said.

‘What’s that?’ she said.

I pointed to a stall where fresh littis were being made over red-hot charcoal. The cook took a ball of dough and stuffed it with spiced chickpea powder. Flattening the ball with his fingers, he roasted the litti over the coals. Once done, he gave the litti a quick dip in desi ghee. He gave us the littis in a plate with salad, chutney and chokha.

‘What is chokha?’ Riya said.

The stall-owner explained how chokha is made with tomatoes, eggplant and potatoes all mashed together and cooked with green chillies, salt and other spices.

Riya took a bite. ‘This is unbelievable.’

Her expression made the stall-owner’s chest swell with pride.

‘Like it?’ I laughed, knowing the answer.

‘Why don’t they have this in Delhi? All over India? The world?’ Riya said.

‘Bihari things are not considered cool.’

‘Why?’ she said, her mouth full.

‘It’s a poor state. Nobody wants our things, or us. Not yet, at least.’

‘From now on I’m eating this every day.’

We finished our meal. I passed her tissues to wipe her hands.

‘My mother makes even better litti-chokha,’ I said.

‘You make this at home?’ Riya said.

‘All the time. You should come sometime,’ I said.

She kept quiet. I sensed her hesitation. We stepped out of the Maurya Complex.

‘You don’t have to come. I will bring some home-made litti-chokha for you,’ I said.

‘No, I would love to visit Dumraon. I want to meet your mother, too. I’ve heard so much about her.’

We found an auto outside Maurya Complex. ‘Chanakya Hotel for madam first. After that, Boring Road,’ I told the driver.

‘What did you say? Boring?’ Riya giggled.

‘What? Yes, my classes are on Boring Road.’

‘The name says it all.’

I laughed,

‘They aren’t bad. just tough to learn English in such a short time.

‘The challenge is, you have to focus on three things at the same time: English, public speaking and, the most important, the actual content of the speech,’ she said.

I looked at her. She had nailed the problem on its head.

The auto moved through the bustling traffic. I have no idea why everyone in Patna loves honking so much.

We sat in silence for a few minutes.

‘Madhav,’ Riya said.

‘Yeah?’ I said.

‘Nothing.’

‘Say it, Riya.’

‘Would you like me to help you with English?’

I didn’t reply at once.

‘I’m sorry. It’s okay. I won’t ask twice.’

The auto reached Chanakya Hotel. As she stepped off, she held my hand for a second.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply my English is superior to yours or anything like that.’

‘When can we start?’ I said.

'Here's the plan,' she said. She slid an A4 sheet towards me.

We were in Takshila Restaurant at the Chanakya Hotel for dinner. We were meeting a week later, after I had spent Monday to Friday in Dumraon. The waiter arrived to take our order. She ordered plain yellow daal and phulkas.

'I miss home food,' she said.

I missed you, I wanted to say but didn't. The five days in Dumraon had felt like five life sentences.

'Sure, I like yellow daal,' I said.

I picked up the A4 sheet. It read:

Action Plan: Operation Gates

Objective: Ten-minute speech in fluent English to a live American audience.

10 minutes = approximately 600 words.

Focus Areas:

1. Delivery: confidence, style, accent, flow, pauses, eye contact.
2. Content: rational points, emotional moments, call for aid.

I looked up at Riya. 'You typed all this?'

'No, little elves did at midnight,' she said. 'Go on, read the whole sheet.'

I turned to the sheet again.

Top Ten Tools:

1. YouTube videos of famous speeches.
2. Watching English movies with subtitles.
3. English-only days—no Hindi conversation allowed.
4. Working on speech content in Hindi first.
5. Recording an English voice diary on the phone through the day.
6. Thinking in English.
7. Watching television news debates in English.

8. Calling call centres and choosing the English option.
9. Reading out English advertisements on street hoardings.
10. Reading simple English novels.

I whistled.

‘It’s a different approach,’ she said. She walked me through the ten steps and spoke non-stop for a few minutes, explaining each step.

‘And last, reading simple English novels, like, the one by that writer, what’s his name, Chetan Bhagat,’ she said, ending her monologue.

I watched her face, pretty as always. *Do not fall for her again*, I screamed in my head.

‘So, let us start. Talk to me in English.’

I switched to English. The English I knew at that time, that is.

‘I am...very...thankful...for your making the list...for learning the English,’ I said.

‘Thank you for making this list of steps to learn English,’ Riya said. She spoke in a calm voice, without sarcasm or judgement.

‘Yes, same thing only.’

‘So instead of “same thing only”, say “I meant the same”,’ Riya said. ‘I will correct you sometimes. It is not that I don’t understand you. I just want to make sure you say it right.’

‘Thanks,’ I said.

‘Now that one word was correct.’

I laughed.

She made me talk to the waiter in English. I did fine, since the waiter’s English was worse than mine. She didn’t correct me when the waiter was around anyway.

‘And sweet.. .later,’ I said as he left us.

‘We will order the sweet dish later,’ Riya said, ‘or, dessert instead of sweet dish.’

‘Desert? Like Rajasthan desert?’ I said.

‘D.E.S.S.E.R.T. Different word, same sound.’

‘I hate that about English. Hindi doesn’t have that problem.’

‘Hindi is incredible. We speak it like we write it. There’s no need to learn pronunciation separately,’ Riya said.

‘So why doesn’t everyone speak Hindi?’ I said.

‘Because we are not...’ Riya said and paused. ‘Oh my God, you asked that question correctly.’

‘What?’

‘You said, “So why doesn’t everyone speak Hindi?” in perfect English. When you say something without being self-conscious, you say it correctly.’

I tried to look modest.

‘We will get there, Madhav,’ she said. She patted the back of my hand on the table.

I wondered if we would ever get there as a couple.

Don’t fall in love with her again, a voice within me warned *You never fell out of love with her,* another voice countered with an evil laugh.

*

‘Dolphins? In Patna?’ Riya said.

‘Yes, there are river dolphins in the Ganga. If you’re lucky, you might spot them,’ I said.

I had brought Riya to the Ganga ghat near Patna College oft Ashok Rajpath on a Sunday evening. For twenty rupees a head, boatmen took you to the sandy beach on the opposite bank. She held my hand to keep her balance as we tiptoed on the wooden plank towards the boat.

She slipped a little and clasped my hand tighter. I wished the shaky wooden plank would never end.

We sat in the boat. The diesel engine purred into action, making conversation impossible. The sun had started to set. It turned the sky, the river and Riya’s face the colour of fire.

On the other side, we stepped on to the sand and walked to the tea stalls. We sat inside one of the many gazebo-styled bamboo huts meant for tea-stall customers.

‘It’s beautiful,’ Riya breathed.

‘All we have for peace in this city,’ I said.

We sat in silence and watched the ripples of water, my hand inches from hers. I wondered if she would be okay if I held it. She had held mine on the plank, after all. But I guess it was okay on the plank, because she needed to hold it. Now, it would mean something else. At least, that is how girls think. Still, I decided to try my luck. I inched my hand playfully towards hers. She sensed it, and moved her hand away.

How do girls do this? Do they have antennae, like insects do? Or are they thinking of the same thing themselves? How else are they able to react so well so fast?

‘You’ve started working on the speech?’ Riya said, shaking me from my thoughts.

‘Sort of,’ I said.

I took out sheets of paper from my pocket. I had scribbled notes in Hindi on the key points I needed to address. I handed them to her.

‘The school needs toilets, chairs, blackboards...’ she read out. She turned to me. ‘Madhav, you need to do more. This is just a list of things you want.’

‘I’m still working on it.’

‘He is Bill Gates. People ask him for things wherever he goes. The idea is to not ask for anything and yet earn a grant.’

‘Not ask?’

‘Yes. Never ask. It comes across as needy.’

I looked at her. *Did she leave me because of the same reason?* ‘I do that sometimes. I come across as needy,’ I said in a small voice.

She understood my context. She didn’t admit it, of course. She simply paused before she spoke again. ‘These goras are different. You have to come across as happy and confident. Not desperate.’

‘Read the rest. I talk about other things, how the school was created and more.’

She patted my shoulder.

‘You are doing fine. Don’t worry. We will do this together. I’ve

lived in London and met many Americans there. I know how these goras think.'

'How was London?' I said, barely able to make out her features in the dying light.

In classic Riya style, she stayed silent.

'It's okay. I won't ask again. Should we go back?'

She nodded. We reached the pier. The plank to the boat felt even more precarious in the darkness. She held my arm again. I don't know if I imagined it, but it felt tighter than earlier. She seemed a little more vulnerable. She came across as a little more, if I dare say the word she hated, needy.

We sat as far away as possible from the other passengers and the noisy diesel engine.

'London was nice in parts,' she said.

I wanted to ask which parts were nice and which parts weren't, but I didn't. The more you ask, the more she clams up, I thought. I looked at her. She smiled, but it did not reach her eyes. I could read her every expression, even in the darkness.

'Would you like to hold my hand?' I said.

'Why?' she said.

'The boat is moving,' I said. Lame answer. But how else does one answer such a stupid question?

'So?'

'Nothing,' I said and looked ahead. The whirr of the engine filled the awkward silence. Halfway through our journey, temple bells began to ring in the distance. I felt something near my hand. She placed her fingers on top of mine. I guess men have an antenna about these things, too.

I didn't turn towards her. I knew her. If I made eye contact now, she would withdraw.

'I am happier here than in London,' she said. I hadn't asked her to compare the two places.

'When are you coming home?' I said, still looking ahead but

choosing my words with care, afraid she would withdraw.

‘Soon. Let me move into mine first,’ she said.

‘I’m staying back tomorrow, to help you move in.’

‘You don’t have to. I hardly have any luggage.’

‘Exactly. You need to buy things. The shopkeepers will rip you off. I’ll come with you, okay?’

‘Thanks,’ she said. I guess that meant yes.

We reached the ghats. I clasped her hand and held it until we got off the plank on to firm ground. The old me would have asked her if holding hands meant something. But the old me had screwed up big time in the past. So I decided to ‘play it cool’.

We took an auto back from the ghats. I talked about the furniture market near Nala Road, places to buy mattresses and the cheapest vegetable markets. Of course, these stupid topics meant nothing compared to the monumental development of her sliding two fingers on top of mine.

We reached her hotel. She stepped off the auto.

‘Eleven tomorrow?’ I said.

‘Yes, thank you so much. And I loved the river-ride today.’

‘Which part?’ I asked and kicked myself mentally. Did I come gums as fishing? Did it set off the ‘desperate’ alarm?

‘Everything,’ she said.

Miss Diplomatic Somani is not that easy a nut to crack, after all.

'I am officially, completely, exhausted,' Riya said. She wore a pink kurti and dark blue tights. Her face had turned pink to match her kurti.

She plonked herself on the four mattresses we had dragged into her apartment.

'Remove the plastic covers at least,' I said.

She ignored me. She lay down on the mattresses and did side leg twists like we used to do on court.

'Cut the drama,' I said.

'Do we have to do everything today?' she said.

We had made four trips to the market, one each to buy groceries, electrical appliances, utensils and mattresses.

'Why do you need four mattresses?' I had asked her in the shop.

Two for the bedrooms, and two will become a diwan in the living room. I don't have a sofa.'

'Let's get a sofa,' I had said. She refused. She wanted a 'casual-chic' look. I guess it means not rich-looking but still classy.

'Get up,' I said and pulled her up by her hand.

Thanks,' she said. 'Thanks for everything today.'

'Mention not,' I said.

'Please don't mention it,' she said.

'What?'

'Sorry, correcting you.'

I laughed.

'I thought we only learnt English on weekends?' I said.

'No, sir. We practise it all the time,' she said.

I looked at my watch. 'It's nine. I better leave.'

'What about dinner?'

'I'll get something from outside,' I said in slow but correct English.

'Why? We have stocked up. We have a hot plate. Would you like some Maggi?' she said.

It took us a while to unpack and set up everything. She

inaugurated her hot plate and utensils. An hour later, we ate Maggi noodles in new stainless steel bowls from which the stickers wouldn't come off.

I slurped the noodles from my spoon. At one point, she removed a noodle from my chin. I wanted to spill noodles all over my face.

We finished dinner and cleaned up the kitchen.

At ten, I decided to leave.

'You will get an auto?' she said.

'I can walk to the bus stand,' I said. 'There is a bus to Dumraon at eleven.'

'Maybe I'll come with you next week. Let me settle in.'

'You'll be okay alone?' I said.

'Yeah,' she said, her voice heavy, or perhaps just tired.

'Sure' I said.

'I look forward to being alone, Madhav,' she said.

*

'You sure your mother will be okay with me staying over?'

'Of course. It's a long way to go back the same day,' I said.

We were riding in her company's Innova, which made the journey a lot faster than the bus I usually took. The roads of Bihar are, well, for the adventurous, to say the least.

'Ouch,' Riya said as her head bumped against the car roof.

'That bump is a sign we are close,' I said.

*

I showed Riya the guestroom.

'These rooms are massive. You really are a prince.'

'Everything is falling apart,' I said.

I took her to my room. She noticed the basketball posters on my wall. I sat on my bed, she took the chair opposite me. It reminded me of us in Rudra, years ago.

'You still play?' she said.

I shook my head.

'Me neither,' she said.

‘Want to? This evening?’

‘Work first. You have to watch *The Godfather* on my laptop.’

‘I did,’ I said.

‘You saw the first part. Now see part two with subtitles.’

I made a face, which didn’t impress her much. She wore a fitted white T-shirt and black tights. Although fully covered, the snug outfit highlighted her curves. I couldn’t believe Riya was in my room in Dumraon.

I wanted to kiss her. I thought about how mind-blowing that would be after so many years.

‘What are you thinking? Like, now?’ She snapped her fingers.

Her question made me freeze.

‘Huh? Nothing. Lunch. Should we have lunch?’

‘Did you think of that in English or Hindi?’

I tried to remember. Well, I had not thought about lunch at all. I had thought about kissing her. And you don’t think that in any particular language.

‘See, Madhav, the so-called fluent English speakers, they think in English. Not all the time, but a fair amount. Like, when you make a decision in your head, do you make it in English or Hindi?’

‘Hindi, of course,’ I said.

‘That’s the issue here, If you want to speak English well, it has to start in the head.’

She knocked the side of my head. The contact made me feel a bit drunk. I guess guys are born with this defect. Once they like a girl, even an accidental touch can be intoxicating.

‘I’m trying,’ I said.

‘Good. You have Internet here?’

I shook my head.

‘I wanted to show you some speeches,’ she said.

‘There is a cyber cafe nearby,’

‘Let’s go, I will get to see Dumraon,’

*

There isn't much to see in Dumraon. Yet, she found everything exotic.

'Sueh cute roads,' she said, as we walked along the narrow chicken-neck path outside my house.

'You should see them in the monsoon. Not so cute then,' I said.

We came to the Shakti Cyber Cafe. A bunch of local guys sat before dusty computers. They pretended to look at news websites, even though they were probably downloading porn from other open tabs.

'Steve Jobs's "Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish",' she said as she opened YouTube.

Hungry for you, foolish for you, I thought.

'Oh,' I said.

'What?' she said as the video took time to load.

'I thought of something in English.'

'Excellent. What?'

I quickly shook my head and watched the video.

'You want subtitles?' Riya said. It was magical how she could sense what I wanted even before I thought of it.

I nodded. She had already picked a video with subtitles.

Steve Jobs had founded Apple Computers. He had competed with Bill Gates of Microsoft, the man who I had to give a speech to. It was a perfect situation in which to use a word I had learnt in English classes—ironic.

Steve, a thin, balding white guy in graduation robes, stood on a podium at Stanford University. I listened to the speech and read the subtitles.

'I never graduated from college. Truth be told, this is the closest I've ever gotten to a college graduation. Today, I want to tell you three stories from my life. That's it. No big deal. Just three stories.'

I was immediately hooked. I didn't know this guy but I liked him in seconds.

He spoke about how he was born to an unwed mother who had put him up for adoption. A CEO of a major global company speaking

so openly about his past stunned me. He talked about dropping out of college to save his adoptive parents' money, and then sleeping on dorm floors and attending the classes he liked.

'I returned Coke bottles for the five-cent deposits to buy food with, and I would walk the seven miles across town every Sunday night to get one good meal a week at the Hare Krishna temple. I loved it.'

He had said nothing about his achievements yet. Still, you felt his greatness.

'And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition.'

'Intuition?' I said.

'Gut instinct, what you feel from the heart,' Riya said.

Did I have the courage to follow my heart? Did I have the courage to propose to Riya again?

Finally, Steve ended his speech.

'Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish. And I have always wished that for myself. And now, as you graduate to begin anew, I wish that for you.'

The crowd in the video applauded. I joined in. The cyber cafe's owner turned to watch the whacko customer who clapped after YouTube videos.

'Can I see it again?' I said.

'Sure. I will check my mail on another computer.'

I watched the speech three more times. I repeated some of the lines as practice. I stood up after an hour.

I saw Riya in the adjacent cubicle, her mail open on the screen. She looked grave.

'Should we go have lunch?' I said. I guess staying hungry isn't so easy after all.

I glanced at her monitor. I just about managed to read the subject line: 'Dad'.

She pressed 'send'. The screen disappeared. She logged out and stood up.

We walked back to the haveli in silence.

Savitri tai served us daal and subzi with chapatis.

‘Litti-chokha is for dinner, when Ma arrives,’ I said.

‘Sounds great,’ Riya said with no noticeable enthusiasm.

‘Everything okay?’ I said.

‘Dad’s been unwell for a while.’

I did count. This was the first time she had shared something substantial with me.

‘What happened?’

‘He’s a heart patient. The last by-pass didn’t go well. It’s not looking good.’

‘Will you need to go to Delhi?’

‘Probably. I don’t know. They hide things from me,’ she said. I guess hiding things from one another is a Somani family tradition.

She was looking down at her food, her spoon circling the daal. Perhaps it was Jobs’s speech that gave me the courage to stand up and move to her side. I put my arm around her shoulders.

She stood up and hugged me back, though not too tightly.

‘I’m sure he’ll be fine. The best doctors in Delhi must be looking after him,’ I said.

She nodded and sat back down.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I’m such a bother.’

‘It’s not a bother, Riya. It’s okay to be down now and then. And to talk about, it.’

‘No, it’s not,’ she whispered, more to herself than to me.

We finished our meal. She picked up the plates.

‘Where’s the kitchen?’ she said.

I pointed towards it. I tried to imagine her living in my house forever. She would never adjust to living in Dumraon, of course. My crumbling haveli could never be her 100, Aurangzeb Road.

I went to the kitchen and found her washing dishes.

‘What are you doing?’ I said, surprised.

‘Relax, I do this in Patna, too,’ she said.

‘My mother should see this,’

‘Why?’ she said.

‘Nothing,’ I said.

*

‘Is she here?’ my mother said.

‘Yes,’ I said.

I met my mother in the courtyard as she came back from school. I took her bag filled with notebooks. We walked into the house.

‘Where is she?’

‘In the guestroom.’

‘Girls are also strange these days. Go live in whichever boy’s house.’

‘What are you saying, Ma? She is a friend from college. I invited her over.’

‘Do her parents know?’

‘I don’t know.’

My mother shook her head.

‘Be nice, Ma,’ I said.

‘You like her?’

‘What kind of a question is that? You get people you dislike home?’

‘Answer straight.’

‘I need to bathe.’

*

The water in the bathroom tap was a mere trickle. It took me forty-five minutes to fill a bucket and bathe. I changed into shorts and a T-shirt and came down to the living room. Riya and my mother were already there.

‘You met already?’ I said.

‘Hi,’ Riya said. ‘I was just chatting with aunty.’

‘You played basketball with her?’ my mother said, sounding betrayed.

‘Sometimes.’

My mother didn’t respond. I felt guilty. I needed to give a longer answer.

‘Well, she was in the team too. Girls’ team,’ I said.

‘You never mentioned her. You used to talk about basketball so much,’ my mother said.

‘I didn’t?’ I said, pretending to be surprised.

‘No,’ my mother said.

‘We only played in the first year,’ I said.

‘Why?’ my mother said.

I paused to think. ‘Our groups changed,’ I said.

Riya and I looked at each other. Savitri tai brought nimbu paani for all of us.

My mother turned to Riya.

‘So how long were you married for?’

My mouth fell open. How did my mother know? Riya sensed my shock.

‘We were chatting earlier,’ she said.

About your divorce? I thought. She never spoke about it with me.

‘A year and a half,’ Riya said.

‘Kids?’ my mother said.

What the hell? What is Ma talking about?

Riya shook her head.

‘Why did you get married so early?’ my mother said. She obviously had no filter in her head on what to ask or not. Of course, it was a question I wanted to ask Riya too.

To my surprise, Riya didn’t filter her responses either.

‘I was stupid. They were family friends. Everyone thought it was a good idea. But mostly, I did it because I was stupid.’

‘Where are your parents?’

‘Delhi.’

‘You’re a Punjabi?’ my mother said, like all grown-up Indians do. They just have to know your community.

‘Marwari. I’m Riya Somani.’

‘Ah,’ my mother said. ‘They let you come to Bihar and work?’

‘They don’t let me do things. I wanted to. I can decide for myself,’ Riya said, her feminist feathers beginning to flutter.

‘You can?’ my mother said. I sensed a tinge of sarcasm in her voice. Riya did too.

‘I mean, those decisions don’t always work out so well. But I do like to make my own decisions,’ she said.

‘They have a big business in Delhi, Ma,’ I said. ‘Infrastructure.’

‘Marwaris are a rich community,’ my mother said. ‘Why are you working?’

‘I want to be independent,’ Riya said.

I realized this whole conversation was not flowing like the river of milk and honey I had hoped it would.

‘Riya loves litti-chokha. In fact, I called her home for that,’ I said.

My mother’s frown vanished at the mention of her favourite cuisine.

‘Really?’ she said. ‘When did you have it?’

‘Here in Bihar. Madhav takes me to Maurya Complex in Patna all the time.’

‘All the time?’ my mother said, one eyebrow raised.

‘Well, a few times,’ I said, my tone guilt-ridden again. ‘Twice or thrice. Classes keep me so busy, I don’t get the time.’

Ma took a big sip of her nimbu paani.

‘I thought you go there to study,’ she said. ‘Is the speech ready?’

‘Going on. Riya is helping me,’ I said.

‘Is she?’ my mother said. I wished I had told her more about Riya, but I could never gather the courage. I decided the only way forward was to change the topic.

‘Should I ask Savitri tai to lay the table?’ I said.

‘I can do that,’ Riya said.

My mother looked at her.

‘If it’s okay? I know the kitchen. I can help Savitri tai.’

My mother did not respond. Riya took it as assent and left.

'Now I see why you go to Patna,' Ma said.

'It's not what you think. Riya is just a friend. An old classmate,' I said.

'How come she's already married and divorced?'

'That surprised me too. I ran into her in Patna by chance.'

'And she latched on to you,' Ma said.

'Not true. I can't study English all the time, Ma. I need friends there. Besides, she helps me practise. Her English is excellent. She is from a high-class society.'

'I can see the class,' my mother said.

'I don't know the details of her divorce. Her father is sick. Be nice to her.'

'I am nice. She is staying in my house. What else do you want me to do?'

I rolled my eyes.

'Why is she wearing such tight pants?' she said next.

'I have no idea, Ma,' I said, my voice loud. 'I don't know why she got married or divorced or wears tight pants. Can you let her be?'

'You are shouting at your mother for her?'

My mother looked away from me. It was Rani Sahiba's classic sulky face.

'I'm not shouting,' I said, my voice still too loud to classify it as anything else. My mother looked away.

I realized I needed her cooperation to have a peaceful dinner.

'Sorry,' I said.

Ma sniffed.

En route to the dining room with a stack of plates, Riya smiled at me. I smiled back.

'I said sorry, Ma,' I said after Riya went back to the kitchen.

My mother glared at me

'I've suffered enough in life. Don't add to it,' she said.

'I'm not,' I said. 'By the way, have you heard of Steve Jobs?'

I explained how watching speeches on YouTube had helped me, as had many of Riya's unconventional techniques.

'I have to think in English, Ma. Like high-class people. Their English sounds different, no?'

'We are not low class either,' my mother said.

'Dinner's served,' Riya said, clapping her hands in the dining room.

We had a peaceful dinner, with no major retorts, taunts or sarcasm. When two women don't share the right vibe, a peaceful hour together is a minor miracle.

'I ate too much,' Riya said and held her stomach. 'This was one of the best meals I have ever had.'

'We eat like this every day,' my mother said, and stood up and left the table.

'I have a confession to make,' Riya said. We were sitting on a jute charpoy on the haveli's roof, looking up at the millions of stars you could never see in the Delhi night sky. 'What you said about Bihar and its simplicity in college had something to do with me accepting the Patna offer.'

'Really?' I said. 'And that you hoped to run into me?'

'Yeah, right.' She laughed, so I couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic.

'Don't worry about my mother,' I said.

'I'm not. Why should I be worried?' she said and smiled at me.

'All mothers are the same, I guess.'

'Meaning?'

'Nothing. She's Rani Sahiba. Literally, the queen of her castle. She is entitled to say whatever she wants.'

'She's not bad at heart,' I said.

'I know. Did she mention me? When I went to the kitchen?'

'Not really. Why?'

'My clothes. My divorce. Anything?'

'Nothing important,' I said, thinking of little else but how to casually hold her hand. When I did gather the courage to do it, I lunged forward suddenly and grabbed her hand. It was not a subtle move.

'Careful,' she said.

'What?'

'My left wrist. It's a little tender.'

'How come?'

'An old injury.'

'Basketball?'

She gave a hesitant, non-committal nod. I released her left: hand and held her right.

'Your mother is downstairs,' she said.

I took her words as encouragement. She had not said that holding

her hand was wrong, she only mentioned my mother.

‘She’s asleep,’ I said.

I entwined my fingers with hers. She didn’t protest.

I turned my face towards hers. She freed her hand and slid a few inches away.

‘Hey, you want to do speech rehearsals here? Its a good place to do it,’ she said. It is unique, the grace with which girls can deflect situations and topics.

‘Not now, I’m tired,’ I said.

‘Should we go downstairs then?’ Riya said, all innocence.

I looked into her eyes. She understood that look. We had shared it years ago in college.

I leaned forward, my lips an inch from hers.

‘No, Madhav, no,’ she said and gently placed her hand on my chest. However, she didn’t push me away Her fingers were directly over my heart, I leaned back a bit.

‘Why not?’ I said,

‘We agreed to be just friends, No more.’

‘Why not?’

‘Don’t ask the same question twice.’

‘I can try twice.’

I leaned over again. This time, she pushed me back.

‘Don’t do this. Please,’

Her eyes were wet. I withdrew.

‘Can we at lease talk?’ I said, Losers get words from girls; winners get kisses, ‘We are talking.’

‘Are you worried about your dad?’

‘Among other things,’

‘Which you won’t share with me,’

‘Madhav, you are a nice guy. An amazing guy, okay?’

‘If you say so,’ I said,

‘But,’

‘There’s always a “but”’

‘Can we please not do all this other stuff?’

‘Not now,’ I agreed, ‘But maybe later?’

‘Madhav,’ she said, I don’t want to get your hopes up. So no "maybe later",’

‘Why? Because of what I did in college?’

‘Are you crazy? Do you really think I will hold on to something from years ago?’

‘So what is it? I’m not good enough for you?’ I said.

She smiled at me.

‘What?’ I said.

‘I just said you are an amazing guy.’

‘Give us a shot, Riya,’ I said.

‘A shot? Wow. Someone knows English slang.’

‘A chance. Whatever. Anyway, let it be. Okay, fine, friends.’

I realized I had blown my moment. A failed attempt at kissing has to be aborted, not converted into an argument.

We stayed silent for a minute.

‘My father is dying,’ she said. ‘And I don’t know what to feel.’

‘He is your father.’

‘Yes. I hope he makes it.’

‘I can’t live without you, Riya,’ I said, or rather, blurted out, She turned to me.

‘Not again.’

‘Sorry,’ I said.

I turned the other way. Girls have no idea how much it hurts when our love is rejected. Yet, men are expected to keep trying and take hits all the time.

She held my hand. I pulled it away. Be a man, they say. Well, it sucks to be a man sometimes.

‘Stop sulking, Your Majesty,’ she said.

‘One kiss,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘Just one kiss. After that I promise we will be friends. Just friends.’

‘How does that work?’

‘I don’t know. I can’t get that one kiss out of my head. I need to know I mean something to you. I understand your situation—the divorce, your dad and your job. I won’t expect anything. I will let you be. I will be a friend and value you as one. But just one kiss.’

She applauded.

‘What?’

‘You said that entire thing in English. Oh my God, Madhav.’

For a moment I forgot about the kiss. I reflected upon my achievement.

‘I really did,’ I said, surprised.

‘Awesome,’ she said.

I returned to reality.

‘So, yes, one kiss.’

‘But...’

‘Shh...’ I said and kept my hand on her mouth. I came forward and kissed my fingers placed on her lips. Her eyes blinked in surprise.

I removed my fingers. My lips landed on hers. We had kissed exactly three years, four months and eleven days ago. She put her arms around me as if to keep her balance. The kiss was light at first, and then picked up intensity. Frogs croaked, crickets chirped and the breeze soared as Dumraon’s night sky witnessed Bihar’s, if not the world’s, best kiss ever.

She buried her face in my shoulder. More than kisses, I could tell she wanted to be held, as if she had not hugged anyone in a really long time.

I held her tighter, landing kisses wherever I could, on her face, neck, lips. After a minute, or maybe an hour, she stirred.

‘That lasted a while,’ she said.

‘Still counts as one kiss. Was it nice?’ I said.

‘Madhav.’

‘What?’

‘You said one kiss. Not one kiss, then an in-depth discussion on

the quality of the kiss, or what did the kiss mean, or can we do this again or let's get carried away. I did it for you. So you know you mean something. But please don't discuss mention or bring this up ever again.'

I looked at her, shocked. How can you brush aside the most incredible kiss in the state, possibly the world, without even a basic review? But I said, 'Fine,'

'Sit up,' she said. She sat cross-legged on the charpoy. I faced her, but I moved far enough so she wouldn't feel I could strike again.

She smiled at me.

'What?'

'It was nice,' she said.

'What was?'

'What we just did.'

'We sat up cross-legged. That was nice?' I said.

'Yes,' she said and laughed. 'It was wonderful how we sat up. Wow. You sit pretty well.'

'We have sat before.'

'This was a different league. Guess maturity makes a man better,' she said, 'at...sitting.'

We laughed. I wanted to touch her, if only to touch my fingertips to hers, but didn't. I couldn't believe we had kissed again. We chatted about old classmates of ours. We had lost touch with most of them, but tried to update each other with our limited information, Twenty minutes later, she coughed. Once, twice and then five more times.

'You okay?'

'Yeah, it is a little cold,' she said and went into a coughing fit.

'I'll get water.'

I ran downstairs to my room. I came back with a bottle of water. She lay down on the charpoy, right hand on her forehead.

'You're not well, Riya?' I said.

She coughed again, sat up and had some water.

I touched her forehead.

'You don't have fever,' I said,

'I'm exhausted, I guess.'

'Did I stress you out?' I said. I felt guilty about kissing her.

'No. I should just go rest.'

She had a coughing fit again, this time more violent.

I helped her stand up and escorted her to the guestroom, 'Will you be okay? You want someone here?' I said, She smiled, 'Nice try, sir. But I will be just fine,' she said, 'I didn't mean that. I could wake up Ma,'

'No, no, please. I need sleep, that's all. We are going to the school tomorrow, right?'

'If you're feeling better.'

'I'll be okay. Goodnight, Madhav,' she said.

'Goodnight, Riya,' I said, not wanting to leave.

'Thanks for taking care of me,' she said, her voice sleepy.

She shut the door. I came back to my room. As I lay in my bed, I touched my lips. I thought about our magnificent lip-lock under the stars.

'I love you, Riya Somani,' I whispered before I drifted off to sleep.

'So this is the famous Dumraon Royal School,' Riya said, her eyes widening at the sight of hundreds of kids buzzing around like bees.

'Nothing royal about it,' I said.

'Well, I hear a prince runs it,' she said.

She smiled at me. I gave her an all-knowing, what-happened-last-night look. Of course, not much had happened. But a kiss is a kiss is a kiss.

'We decided never to talk about it,' she said.

'I didn't say anything.'

'Tell your eyes to be quiet then. They talk too much.'

I laughed. 'How's your cough?'

'Better,' she said.

We reached school at nine, two hours after Ma. Riya had slept in. Since she did not know the way, I had to wait for her. She, had donned a skirt and top first, but I had asked her to change into a salwar-kameez instead. Not that the kids would care but the principal, or Rani Sahiba, would. She had to approve of the dress code. So Riya switched to a plain white chikan salwar-kameez.

We entered the staffroom.

'You finally made it. Welcome,' my mother said. I ignored her sarcasm. Riya and I greeted her, but Ma only nodded, without looking up from her notebooks.

I introduced Riya to the staff.

Tarachand ji duly rang the bell. My mother stood up.

'Where are you going, Ma? It is my period.'

'Are you working today?' she said.

'Yes, of course.'

'Good, because I have a hundred books to correct.'

She sat down again.

'Is it okay if Riya waits here?' I said.

'Oh, I could walk around,' Riya said.

‘It’s fine,’ my mother said.

‘Or I could help with the books?’ Riya said.

My mother looked up and lowered her reading glasses.

‘Help?’

‘I can correct some notebooks. Should I take a pile?’

In a slow movement, Ma pushed a pile towards her.

I smiled. Rani Sahiba’s heart could melt. I imagined the three of us at school every day, after it had received the Gates grant. If you are imagining it, might as well dream of the perfect scenario, so I thought . Of Riya, my mother and me, laughing and correcting notebooks. I thought of Riya and me teaching the school kids basketball.

‘Madhav?’ my mother interrupted my daydream.

‘Huh?’

‘Class?’

‘I was just leaving,’ I said.

*

‘Who is that didi?’ a little girl in class III asked me.

I taught classes III, IV and V simultaneously. Since we didn’t have enough teachers or classrooms, we had come up with a new system. I divided the blackboard into three parts.

Each class had a third of the blackboard. I would teach a concept in one class and give them a problem. While they solved it, I moved on to the next class. It wasn’t the best way to teach, but the kids adapted to it.

‘She’s my classmate from Delhi. Same as you have classmates here,’ I said.

‘She’s so pretty,’ another class III girl called Shabnam said. ‘Are all Delhi girls so pretty?’

I smiled.

‘Just like all Dumraon girls are pretty.’

‘Are all Delhi girls so tall?’ Shabnam said.

‘No. Only those who can write the nine-times table.’ The girls giggled and got on with their classwork.

I moved to class IV and then to class V. Forty minutes into the class, I sat down for a break. I had finally managed to keep all three classes busy with their respective work.

‘Madhav sir,’ a ponytailed girl next to Shabnam said.

‘What?’

‘Bring your friend to class.’

‘Why?’

‘Please.’

‘No. This is study time.’

A couple of other girls followed and started the ‘please’ routine. Soon, the whole class chanted ‘please, please, please’ to me. I had taught them about manners just the previous week. Now they were using them against me.

‘Fine, I will get her,’ I said, ‘provided you stay absolutely quiet and work.’

Everyone nodded and placed their fingers on their lips. I left the classroom. The class burst into noise as soon as I stepped out.

My mother and Riya sat in silence, each busy with their stack of notebooks.

‘Riya, the students want to meet you.’

‘Me? Why?’ Riya looked up, surprised.

‘Just curious, I guess.’

Riya looked at my mother. Ma didn’t react. I pulled Riya’s arm.

‘Come, no,’ I said.

Riya and I stepped out of the staffroom.

‘How is it going with Ma?’ I said.

‘Why do you ask?’

‘She is sweet, no? Comes across as strict, but is a big softie.’

‘Why are you telling me this, Madhav?’ Riya said.

‘Just.’

We reached the class. The students broke into applause.

‘Hi, I am Riya,’ she said. She knelt down to be on their level. ‘You are so pretty,’ Shabnam said shyly.

Riya tweaked Shabnam's nose. 'So are you,' she said.

Shabnam blushed.

Riya spoke to the girl next to Shabnam. 'What do you want to be when you grow up?'

The girl buried her face in Shabnam's lap.

Riya laughed. She repeated the question to another girl.

'Mother. I want to be a mother,' the girl responded.

'And?' Riya said.

And what?' the girl said.

'Doctor? Engineer? Dancer?'

The little girl thought for a while.

'Teacher,' she said.

'Nice,' Riya said and patted her back.

Riya and I came back to the staffroom. My mother and the other teachers had class. Only Riya and I remained in the staffroom. We sat the long table. She coughed again.

I said, 'You really don't sound okay.'

'I was fine. I don't know,' Riya said. She went into another toughing fit.

'Let's find a doctor,' I said.

'I'll see a doctor in Patna.'

Riya excused herself and stepped outside. She looked around.

'There's no toilet. Kids go in the corner there. Or in the fields outside,' I said, coming up behind her.

Riya walked out to the fields, still coughing. I saw her body shake from a distance. I ran up to her. She turned and smiled at me.

'I'm fine. I just need to properly cough it out.'

'Spit out the phlegm.'

'Sorry, I'm being gross.'

'As if,' I scoffed.

'I should head back,' she said.

'Alone? Let me come and drop you.'

Riya laughed. She patted my shoulder.

‘You are so sweet. There is no need. It’s just an allergy.’

‘I should come with you,’ I said.

She held my shoulders and flipped me around.

‘You have classes. Now go back in, mister, before all your little girls come looking for you.’

'Louder, Madhav. You're speaking like a mouse,' Riya shouted, in contrast to my meek voice.

She was grouchy, perhaps because I had made six mistakes in my last rehearsal. She stood before me and stomped her feet. She wore an oversized purple T-shirt and Bermuda shorts. *Purple suits her*, I thought; everything suits her.

'You realize your speech is the day after tomorrow?' she said.

'You're making me tense,' I said.

'Fine.' She threw her hands up in frustration. 'Tense is not good. I'm calm. You're calm,' she said, trying to swing my mood.

'I'm screwing this up,' I said. I sat down on her double-mattress diwan.

I had come to her house on Sunday evening for a final rehearsal. Gates was arriving on Tuesday. I had to leave for Dumraon tomorrow.

'It's looking staged. They will see that I'm no good at this,' I said.

'Relax, Madhav. I'm sorry I shouted.'

She sat next to me and held my hand. She coughed again.

It was my turn to shout. 'Who is this stupid doctor who can't treat your cough?'

'I don't know. It's an allergy. Something in the air. Can't figure out what's making it flare up.'

'What is the doctor in Delhi saying now?'

Riya had gone to Delhi last month, after her family asked her to come meet her father one last time. He had passed away while she was there. She had spent two weeks in Delhi, attending the funeral and various last-rites ceremonies. During that trip, she had also met a senior specialist for her cough.

'Same. Find the allergen. You think I'm allergic to you?' She winked at me, indicating that she felt better. I smacked her with a red cushion.

'Everything okay at home, Riya?'

Riya had not reacted much to her father's death. She had come back from Delhi and hugged me as if she would never let go. She mumbled something about forgiveness. I didn't pry. She would only tell me what she wanted to tell me and when she decided to.

'Yeah. My brothers are taking care of the business and my mother sounded normal the last time I spoke to her.' Then she was all brisk and business-like, clapping her hands to bring me back to the present.

'And now we have Madhav Jha, from Dumraoti Royal School.'

I stood in the centre of her living room.

'Respected Mr Gates, Ms Myers, other members of the Gates foundation delegation, MLA Ojha, eminent people from Dumraon, students and staff of the Dumraon Royal School...'

'You know what?' Riya interrupted me.

'What?'

'Your greeting, it's too long. Let's cut it.'

'Riya, you're changing the script at this stage?'

'Minor change.'

We fine-tuned the words in my notes. I began again. She didn't interrupt me. I spoke for ten minutes.

'And that, my friends, is all I have to say. Thank you,' I said.

Riya clapped.

'How many mistakes?' I said.

'Five.'

'Five?'

'Yeah, but minor ones. They don't really change the meaning of the sentences.'

'You are just saying it to make me less tense, right?'

Riya smiled. 'Let's eat dinner. No point over-rehearsing. We are all set. Relax,' she said.

'Really?'

'Yes. I made some daal, but chapatis will take time. Should I just make some rice? Daal-chawal?'

'Sure,' I said. 'I'll help you.'

We went to her kitchen. She cooked dinner and I made a salad of tomatoes and cucumber with salt, pepper and lemon juice. I set the table while she cooked the food.

We sat down to eat, facing each other at the dining table.

‘When will you arrive in Dumraon?’ I said as I mixed the daal and rice.

‘You won’t freak out if I’m there, no?’

‘Are you stupid? Just come with me tomorrow morning.’

‘No, no. I can’t. Too much work,’ she said.

‘So when?’ I said.

‘Tuesday morning with the Foundation people. You’ve told them about me, right?’

‘Yes,’ I said. I had already given Riya Samantha’s number. Riya's car would follow the Foundation’s contingent. They would all come together.

‘The salad is nice,’ she said.

‘It’s nothing. So simple,’ I said.

‘Simple and nice. I like it. I like simple and nice, Madhav.’

Is that how she sees me too—simple and nice? Or am I too simple and too nice?

*

Post dinner, we cleaned up the kitchen and washed the dishes. We came back to the living room. Riya reclined on the diwan. ‘I’m so tired.’

I checked the time. It was ten.

‘I better leave,’ I said.

Riya coughed again. I got her a glass of warm water.

‘After this speech, your treatment is our first priority. We need to find that allergen or whatever,’ I said.

‘I’m fine. See, it’s gone now,’ she said.

She shut her eyes and patted the mattress, signalling for me to sit next to her. She then put her head on my lap and turned on her side towards me, her eyes closed, by all accounts fast asleep.

‘You want to sleep here?’

No answer.

I got a sheet and pillow from her bedroom. I placed the pillow under her head and the sheet over her.

She smiled in gratitude, like a happy baby.

‘I’m going,’ I mouthed silently against her temple.

She shook her head.

What? I wondered to myself. *What does she want?*

She held on to me when I tried to move.

‘I’ll stay?’ I said.

She didn’t react. This is what girls do. At crucial moments, they won’t give you a straight answer. What’s a guy to do?

‘I’ll stay for a bit?’ I said.

She nodded.

Thank God for some guidance.

‘Okay, I’m tired too. If I stay, I need to lie down as well.’

She moved aside, eyes still shut, making space for me. I was shocked. Riya actually wanted me to lie down with her.

I slid in next to her, as quietly as possible, lest she woke up fully and came to her senses.

‘Sleeping?’ I said, giving her an awkward cuddle.

She nodded. Girl nonsense, again. I grinned. How could she respond if she was asleep?

‘Me too,’ I said. I think it is acceptable, almost necessary, for men and women to lie to one another.

She turned on her side and placed her arm around me. She also curled up a little, so her chest would not come too close to mine. Only her arms and knees touched me.

Girls are really good at such stuff. Even in sleep, they can contort themselves to maintain the boundaries of appropriate physical contact, I shut my eyes. Of course, I could not, just *could not* sleep. I wanted to hold her close. I wanted to kiss her. Restless, I placed an arm around her. I think girls actually believe guys can casually place their

arms around them with no other idea in their heads.

I didn't have courage to do anything else. *Maybe she is getting comfortable with me*, my mind told me. *Why risk it? Chill, Madhav, chill.*

The same mind came up with a different theory a few seconds later. *What if she wants you to do something? She's created the setting. Now if you don't act, she will probably think you are a wimp. Do something, Madhav. Don't just chill.*

The stress of two conflicting ideas in my head made me restless. Riya's smooth arm on me made things worse. I tossed and turned.

Meanwhile, she slept.

Two hours later, Riya opened her eyes. I had involuntarily poked her shoulder, I had pins and needles everywhere from trying not to move.

'What is it?' she said sleepily

'You're awake?' I said, all sparkly voiced.

'You woke me up,' she said.

'Sorry,' I said and patted her shoulder. 'Go back to sleep.'

'Are you tense?'

A shiver went down my spine. How did she know? God has given too many senses to women.

'A little bit.'

'Don't worry. You will perform fine.'

'Huh? What?' I said. What is she talking about? Then it struck me.

'Oh, yes. I've done my best. The rest is up to Mr Gates.'

'Exactly. Now sleep,' she said and closed her eyes again.

'Riya.'

'Hmm?'

'I want to say something, Riya,'

'Shh,' she said, eyes still shut. She placed a finger on my lips.

'Say it to Bill Gates first,' she said and drifted back to sleep.

*

'Thirty minutes? Our programme lasts an hour,' I said, my voice

indignant.

Samantha had called me on Monday morning, a day before Gates's visit.

'I'm sorry, Madhav. It's a really tight schedule for Mr Gates. Maybe you can cut down on a few things.'

'But the kids have been preparing for months.'

'My apologies. Trust me, we have actually cancelled a few places. But there's no question of cancelling your school.'

'Fine. What time?'

'10.30 sharp. See you.'

I went with Tarachand ji to inspect the empty field being converted into a parking lot. From a distance, I could hear the sound of students practising the welcome song.

We had stopped classes for a week to focus on the annual day. Students had planned the cultural programme, scrubbed the floors and walls of the school, drawn new charts and made props for the stage. I went to the staffroom and told my mother about the shortened length of the visit.

She said, 'It was a stupid idea to call these moody goras to school. We've been going mad for the past few weeks for them, and now see.'

At 10.15 on Tuesday morning, my phone rang.

‘We are entering Dumraon. Ten more minutes,’ Samantha said.

I rushed to the school entrance. Twenty kids assigned to be the welcome party formed two lines facing each other. Each held a plate with rose petals to be showered on the guests. A girl from class V would apply the tika.

Parents had already arrived. Over a thousand guests sat on red plastic chairs under the tent set up for the occasion. Dignitaries and special invitees sat in the front VIP rows.

The fleet of eight cars became visible. The kids in the welcome team squealed in excitement. They started to throw flower petals at each other.

‘Stop it,’ I said to them.

Mr Gates stepped out of his car. Media persons surrounded him, taking pictures non-stop. A team of ten Americans, including Samantha, and five Indians from the Foundation, stood behind Mr Gates.

‘Hi,’ Riya’s voice startled me. I turned to face her. She wore a baby-pink saree with little silver dots all over. She resembled the rose petals on the kids’ plates.

‘Saree?’ I said.

She spread her arms. Just seeing her lean body, subtle curves and the pink chiffon fabric draped around her, made me feel richer than the richest man in the world who waited for me.

‘How do I look?’ she said.

‘Like Miss India,’ I said. She laughed.

‘Now attend to your guests. I’ll find a place inside.’

‘But Riya...’

‘Shh... Focus on them. All the best.’

She gave me a quick hug and hurried inside.

‘Mr Gates, this is Madhav, one of the founders of the school, from

the royal family,' Samantha said. 'Madhav, Mr Gates.'

I shook hands with the richest man in the world. They say Mr Gates is so rich, he would not pick up a hundred dollars lying on the road. He makes more money than that in the time it takes to pick up the hundred-dollar bill. He shook hands with me for about five seconds. I wondered how many thousands of dollars he could have earned in that time.

'Good to see you, Madhav,' Mr Gates said. He spoke like an old friend. Students threw petals on him. Samantha made urgent motions that we start the function soon.

A mini-stampede occurred on stage. The welcome-song kids bumped into the dance kids, both sets unprepared for the merger of their programmes. The welcome song, a Saraswati Vandana, had not even ended when Bollywood music took over. The mash-up sounded odd but the audience clapped energetically.

I sat next to my mother on a sofa in the front row. My eyes hunted for Riya; she sat ten seats away on my left. I gestured for her to come sit next to me. She smiled and declined from a distance.

The dance ended with kids dancing to Salman Khan's hit number 'O, O Jaane Jaana'. My mother went up on stage and the music faded. She spoke in Hindi. 'Thank you, children. Can we have a big round of applause for the children, please?'

The crowd dapped hard.

'Let's also welcome Mr Gates and his team, who have come all the way from America,' she said. The crowd responded with loud cheers and more applause. Mr Gates turned around in his seat and waved.

'And now, I understand we have little time. So can I invite Prince Madhav Jha to give the welcome speech?'

The crowd cheered. My heart started to beat fast. I stood up and walked to the stage, passing Riya, who gave me a thumbs-up. I sprinted up to the stage.

*

I scanned the crowd of over a thousand people from left to right,

right to left. The crowd had stopped clapping and were now waiting for me to speak.

I took the mic in my hand. It slipped a little in my palm, which was sweaty with nervousness.

Not a word came out of me. Nothing. I saw the sea of people. Even though I had practised the speech a million times, I couldn't say a thing.

People were beginning to look a little puzzled. Was it a mic problem? they wondered,

I saw Riya in her pink saree in a corner of the front row, her eyes on me. Slowly, she stood up. I felt anxious. What would the crowd think? However, she simply changed her place to come sit right in front of me, I lip-read her.

'One line at a time, go slow,' she mouthed. Her presence kick-started something within me. I blurted out:

'Distinguished guests of the Bill Gates Foundation, respected dignitaries, my dear students and parents, welcome to the Dumraon Royal School,'

The crowd cheered. Most did not understand English, but the mention of Dumraon was enough to set them off. The Foundation delegates looked at me with attention.

Okay, I can do this, I told myself, Just like at the rehearsals with Riya. Just imagine only she is here.

I gazed at Riya. She gave me a nod and smiled. Encouraged, I continued:

'Mr Bill Gates is here with us today. He is the richest man in the world. I am sure he is sick of being told that all the time.'

From a distance, I noticed Bill Gates smile. He is listening to me, I thought.

'Sir, you know that rich in terms of money is not enough to have the richest life. That is why you are here. In my Bihar, which, even though we love it, is one of the most backward places on the planet.'

Riya was nodding after every line.

‘And in this backward Bihar is this extraordinary school. This school with seven hundred kids, three teachers, negligible fees, no proper classrooms, no toilets, no real government support and yet, a lot of riches.’

Riya gave me two thumbs-ups. *Okay, no mistakes so far.*

‘The real riches here are the kids. I am supposed to teach them. However, they have taught me so much. We grown-ups complain about what is lacking in this school, But these kids, they never complain. Come to our school at any time and you will hear only one thing from them—laughter.’

The front row, the people who understood me, broke into applause. The subsequent rows followed a minute later, if only to show that they understood as well.

‘If you ask these kids, they will say this is the best school in the world, They love their friends. They love whatever they get to learn here. However, I know this school can give them more. I know kids deserving more only.’

Riya frowned. *Damn, I’ve made a mistake. It should be ‘I know the kids deserve more’.*

I was panic-stricken. Riya gestured for me to breathe. I inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly. Composed, I continued, ‘I know the kids deserve more. Because I have seen the value a good education can add. It is not just to get you a job. It is not just about knowledge and the new things you learn either. A good education gives you self-confidence.’

I paused to consult my notes. I looked up and spoke again.

‘Today, I speak to you in English. I didn’t know this language well. I was scared and ashamed. People made fun of me. I spent my whole college life with a complex. I don’t want that to happen to these kids. I don’t want anyone to tell them they are not good enough.’

People clapped. I don’t know if they understood me, or if they had just connected with the emotion in my voice.

‘For that I need resources. I need good teachers. However, good

teachers won't come to a school without basic facilities. Students can't be taught without proper classrooms. You can't have a real school without toilets.'

Riya's eyes stayed on me. They kept me going.

'I don't want to beg from our government. I don't want to beg from anyone, actually. Money is not my thing. I left a job at a multinational bank to be here. But sadly, you need some money to do even good things in life.'

Riya signalled for me to sign off; the speech ended around here. However, I continued to speak, unrehearsed and impromptu.

'Mr Gates, people must tell you that you are a lucky man to have so much money. It might irritate you also, since what you have achieved is not just because of luck. It is because of your creativity, vision and hard work. You deserve it. However, let me tell you one place where luck helped you.'

Riya looked at me, shocked. When had I come up with all this, she seemed to be wondering.

I continued, 'Where you are truly lucky is that you were born in America. To be born in a country where everyone gets a chance. One of my kids may have it in him to open a global company like yours, but he won't get a chance. Mr Gates, you were lucky to get that chance. Today, we don't run the school in the hope of aid or recognition. All we are trying to do here is ensure that every kid in our school gets that chance. Thank you.'

Thunderous applause. Some in the crowd, including Riya and Mr Gates, stood up. Soon, the rest of the crowd followed. I received a standing ovation. I couldn't believe I had delivered the speech I had obsessed over for months. I couldn't believe I had conquered one of my biggest demons—English. I folded my hands and left the stage.

I walked back to my seat. My mother turned to me.

'You learnt so much English?' she whispered.

'She taught me.' I pointed to Riya.

My mother and Riya smiled politely at each other.

Students took over the stage again. They did a dance-drama about Lord Krishna, the naughty boy who stole butter. The shortest student in class II, a little girl called Karuna, played Krishna. She wore a headband with a peacock feather stuck in it. After it was over, my mother went up on stage and thanked the participating students.

Samantha from the Gates Foundation came up to me.

‘Bill needs to leave. Otherwise we will be late,’ she whispered in my ear, her voice rushed.

‘Won’t he give a speech?’ I said.

‘He never does.’

My heart sank. I wanted to ask her how the speech went but Samantha seemed too stressed out to notice or care.

‘I would like to call Mr Bill Gates on the stage to say a few words,’ my mother said. Mr Gates smiled and folded his hands, however, asking to be excused.

I ran back up on stage. My mother seemed surprised. I took the mic from her. ‘Mr Gates needs to leave. If it’s okay, I would like to call Inin on stage to accept a small gift from us,’ I said.

Mr Gates obliged. He came on stage, along with two members of his Foundation. A class V girl arrived with the gift. It was a small hand-painted clay pot. Several students had drawn flowers on it. In the pot was a flowering plant.

‘It’s beautiful,’ Mr Gates said as he accepted the gift.

I smiled at him.

‘Nice speech,’ he said.

‘Thank you, sir,’ I said. I shook hands with the other two delegates on stage. One was Phil and the other was Roger, a young assistant to Mr Gates.

‘Phil, do you want to?’ Mr Gates said.

‘Yeah, sure,’ Phil said.

Want to what? I wondered.

'May I have the mic?' Phil said.

I passed the mic to him.

'Namaste,' Phil addressed the audience. That one word in Hindi made the audience swoon in ecstasy. This is how we Indians are. If white guys speak even a tiny bit of Hindi, we love them.

'Kaise hain?' Phil said. The crowd roared in excitement.

'We loved the show. Congratulations to all students, mubarak,' he said. Applause rent the air.

'We found the students here extremely talented. We feel they deserve to have more opportunities to learn. We have decided to give the school a dozen computers, with all our software preloaded.'

The crowd clapped. I did too, wondering what we would do with computers without electricity. Maybe they will come with computer tables, I thought. We could use the tables. Phil continued, 'Of course, computers alone will not be enough in a school that needs infrastructure. Thus, the Gates Foundation would like to give the school a one-time grant of fifty thousand dollars and, subject to inspection, a grant of ten thousand dollars a year for the next five years.'

My head felt light. I saw the activity around me in a haze. Riya jumped. Really, she stood up and jumped. Everything else was a blur. The media sprang into action. Reporters barged ahead of the front row to take pictures. My mother couldn't contain her excitement. She came on the podium and translated the announcement in Hindi, and converted the amounts to rupees.

'Twenty lakh rupees now, and four lakhs a year for the next five years. We will now make this one of the best schools in Bihar,' my mother said. The crowd stood up and continued to clap. MLA Ojha inserted his face in front of as many cameras as possible.

My mother gave me a hug. Samantha came up to me and whispered in my ear, 'Congratulations, Madhav, you did it. We will

talk later, okay? I need to rush. I'll call you.'

'Yes, thank you, Samantha. Thank you so much.'

'Here's my card,' Phil said as he slipped one in my hand. 'Your work has impressed us. I know St. Stephen's. To give up a career and come here is admirable.'

I wanted Riya to hear this too. I looked for her but she was nowhere in sight.

Crowds of villagers filled the stage. Security personnel escorted the Gates Foundation delegation out of the venue to their cars.

'Thank you, Rajkumar sahib,' a villager tried to touch my feet.

'You are our hero,' said another.

I wanted to bring Riya on stage. But the crowd wouldn't let me get past them. The crowd lifted me. I was thankful; at least it would be easier to spot Riya from someone's shoulder.

'Rajkumar Madhav,' said one.

'Zindabad!' the others shouted in response.

I saw her empty seat. *Where did she go?* I wondered. The crowd bobbed me up and down.

I looked around frantically. There was no sign of her. The media wanted quotes. I remember saying this was a fantastic outcome that would change the future of thousands of students of Dumraon.

'Are you happy?' one reporter asked me.

'Uh? Yes,' I said. I was happy. I mean, I should be happy, I told myself. *Where the hell was Riya?*

My mother came to me. The media turned to her.

'Ma, have you seen Riya?' I said.

'Who?'

'My friend. She was sitting in the front row. Where did she go?'

My mother shook her head. She turned to the reporters.

I extracted myself from the crowd on stage. MLA Ojha came up to me.

'Congratulations, Rajkumar ji. Lot of money, eh?'

'Thanks, Ojha ji. Thank you for the opportunity.'

‘It’s okay. Now are we sharing it or what?’ he said.

I looked at him and his slimy eyes. He saw my shocked expression. He burst into laughter. ‘Joking, Rajkumar ji. Always so serious. Of course, it is all for the school.’

I smiled and excused myself. The crowd thinned in about twenty minutes. Most of the parents and students had left. I asked the school staff if they had seen Riya.

‘She was in the front row. We saw her stand up when the white man announced the money,’ Tarachandji said.

I went to the makeshift parking area. No cars. The delegation had left long back. I couldn’t find Riya’s car either.

I called Riya. Nobody picked up. I tried again, thrice. No response. I called Riya’s driver.

‘I am on leave. Madam must have taken another driver,’ he said. I hung up.

I wondered what to do next. *Where could she have gone? Did she get an urgent call from home? Office? Where could she be?*

‘Madhav sir,’ a girl’s voice interrupted my chain of thought.

It was Shabnam, my student from class III. She wore a dhoti and a kurta, having played a villager in the Krishna skit. Her parents stood behind her.

I folded my hands to wish them. They thanked me for a great function.

‘Madhav sir, didi left something for you.’ Shabnam handed me a brown envelope. ‘Riya didi said to give this to you after the function. She left while you were on stage.’

‘Did she tell you where she was going?’

Shabnam shook her head.

‘Did she go in a car?’

Shabnam nodded and left with her parents. I tore open the envelope.

‘Where are you?’ my mother shouted from a distance.

‘Here only,’ I said. I slipped the envelope into my pocket.

‘Many people are coming home for lunch to celebrate. Come, let’s go.’

Our VIP guests had come to the haveli for lunch.

‘What a son you have,’ Kanta aunty, one of my mother’s childhood friends, said.

‘He deserves to be king. He is our asli rajkumar,’ said Bela chachi, a third cousin of my mother.

I thanked my aunts for their compliments.

‘Ma, I need to go upstairs to my room.’

‘Why? What about your lunch?’

‘I’m tired. I’ll have it later.’

I ran upstairs and shut the door to my room. I took out the envelope again. Inside was a computer printout of a letter.

Dear Madhav,

I want you to remain calm when you read this. And, if possible, be calm afterwards too. I am writing this letter to tell you something important. I am leaving Patna.

I am not well, Madhav. I think you noticed my cough over the past month. It is not an allergy. Lung carcinoma is what the oncologist said. Lung cancer. I don't know how. You know I don't smoke. But sometimes it happens to non-smokers. And I had to be one of them.

I don't know why many things happened in my life, actually, so maybe this is all part of the crazy plan God has for me. Marriage, divorce and disease, all within a span of three years. The funny thing is, you came into my life at various stages too. Perhaps we were not meant to be. I must thank you for accepting me as a friend again, Madhav. I was so lost. I made mistakes. I held so much back from you and yet you cared for me. I know you wanted more, but I'm sorry I was unable to give it to you. The first time, it wasn't the right time. The second time, well, I have no time, I couldn't have asked for a better two months than those I spent in Patna. To be able to help you prepare for your speech was a wonderful and special time. The best part was that despite the challenge, you never quit.

I asked you to stay back last night. I had no right to. I just felt greedy and selfish. I wanted more of your caring, while knowing I couldn't give you anything in return.

I know what I mean to you, and if I ask you to care without being able to reciprocate myself you will. Hence, I decided to go. I won't make it harder for you than it needs to be.

I'm not one for details. Suffice to say, I have a little over three months left. The last month is supposed to be horrible. I will skip the gory parts. But trust me, you don't want to know.

You have something meaningful going on in your life. Your school is beautiful. And if Bill Gates does what I think he will, you will be able to make it even better. If that happens, I don't want to be here diverting your attention. I have seen your love. I don't want to see your pity. I am a basketball girl. That is how I want to stay in your mind forever. Your basketball girl, I shall leave you with your school and your mother. Meanwhile, in what little time I have, I plan to travel everywhere I can. In the last month, I will find a corner for myself in this world where I don't bother anyone. Then I will go. You know what? On my last day, I will think of you.

A good thing has come of my decision to leave here. I feel free enough to tell you everything. I don't have to hold back or say the right thing anymore. For instance, it isn't just you who had a sleepless night at my place. I never slept either. I thought of how hard it was going to be to leave you. Funny, I've never felt that way about leaving this world. But leaving you, yes, that is difficult.

So, no crying. No looking for me. No being a Devdas. You are such a good-looking and caring guy, you'll find a lovely girl. Someone who isn't a mess like me. Someone who will love you like you deserve to be loved, I can't wait for tomorrow. You will rock the stage.

I want to end this letter by saying something I wanted to say to at least someone in this lifetime. So, here goes.

I love you, Madhav Jha. I absolutely, completely love you. And will do so to my last day.

Bye, Madhav. Take care.

Riya

My eyes welled up. Tears rolled down my cheeks. My limbs felt weak.

I struggled to stand. The letter fell from my hands. I picked it up and read it again. Memories of me sitting in Riya's car came to me. Images flashed in my head—her fancy wedding-card box, the glucose biscuits and her driving off. She had disappeared to get married then. She had disappeared to die now. In both cases, she had taken, to use a tough English word, unilateral decisions.

I called her number again. This time it was switched off. Perhaps she was driving back to Patna and passing through a no-network area. Or maybe she had thrown away her SIM card.

I went numb, like someone had hit me on the head with a hammer. Nothing mattered to me. The guests at home, the Gates Foundation grant, nothing. Riya had lung cancer, and she hadn't even mentioned it. How could she do this to me?

'Patna, go to Patna,' I told myself. She would go home first, obviously.

I ran downstairs to the living room. A crowd was gathered there.

'Congratulations, Madhav bhai. What a speech you gave,' said the sarpanch. He spoke Hindi and possibly didn't know a word of English.

'Hello, sir. I am from Dainik Bhaskar. We would like to profile you for our Sunday magazine,' a reporter said.

I found my mother.

'Patna? Now?' she said.

'The Foundation people need me to sign some paperwork.'

'I thought they went to Gaya for the other programme.'

'Some of them did. Since they have announced the aid, I need to sign documents.'

'Go after lunch. Right now we have guests.'

'Ma, I need to go now,' I said.

My mother sensed something amiss.

‘Where is that divorcee friend of yours?’ she said. ‘Saree and what all she wore today.’

‘Her name is Riya, Ma. Not divorcee friend,’ I said, irritated.

‘I didn’t make her a divorcee.’

‘She’s dying,’ I said.

‘What?’

I told her about Riya being ill.

‘Poor girl. So young.’

‘I have to go to Patna.’

‘You are telling me or asking for my permission?’

‘I will call you,’ I said and left.

*

Locked. That’s how I found Riya’s house. The neighbours had no clue.

‘Madam is strange. I have never had a client like this,’ said the broker, Hemant, I had called him in case he knew anything.

‘What happened?’ I said.

‘Where are you?’ he said,

‘At her apartment. It’s locked.’

‘Wait, I need to come there anyway.’

Hemant arrived in twenty minutes.

‘She called me last night. She said the keys will be in her letter box,’ he said.

‘Keys?’

Hemant and I walked over to the letter boxes in the building compound. He slid his hand in and drew out a bunch of keys.

‘When madam called me yesterday, she told me she was leaving town. Needs to surrender the house,’ Hemant said, panting as we climbed the stairs.

‘Surrender?’ I echoed stupidly.

‘I told her there is a notice period. Her security deposit will be forfeited.’

‘And?’

‘She said she didn’t care. She said the landlord could keep the deposit.’

He unlocked the apartment. We went in. Her furniture and TV were all there. I went to the kitchen, Everything seemed to be in its place, from the condiments to the appliances. The utensils and the gas stove were still there. I went to her bedroom. I only found her clothes’ cupboard empty.

‘She’s left most of her goods here,’ Hemant said. ‘She said I could sell them.’

‘She did?’

‘Really, she did,’ Hemant said, worried I might stake a claim. ‘Madam said I could sell these goods to cover any costs of breaking the lease or finding the landlord a new tenant.’

‘What else did she say?’ I said.

‘Sir, I can keep these things?’

‘Hemant, tell me exactly what she said. Did she say where she was going?’

‘No, sir. Sir, even the TV I can keep?’

‘Hemant,’ I said, grabbing hold of him by the shoulder. ‘What else did she say?’

‘She said she wouldn’t be coming back as she has quit her job.’

‘Did she say where was she going?’ I said, shaking his shoulder.

‘No, sir,’ Hemant said, looking scared, ‘Sir, you want some of these things? Really, I am not that type of person, She did say I could keep them.’

I ignored him and went to the balcony. I looked down at the street. I took out the letter from my pocket and read it again.

‘I love you,’ it said at the end. I had read that line over a hundred times on my way to Patna.

‘Not fair, Riya,’ I said out loud, ‘not fair.’

‘Sir?’ Hemant came out to the balcony.

‘If you hear anything from her, her company, her friends or anyone, let me know,’ I said.

‘Sure, sir. Sir, I will move her items to a godown. I can wait for some time in case someone comes for them before selling them off.’

‘Whatever,’ I said.

Chetan Bhagat's room,

Chanakya Hotel, Patna

‘You okay?’ I said.

He had paused to wipe his tears. I gave him time. He bit his lip but it was a losing battle. Soon, he was crying like a two-year-old, his tall torso slumped on the chair.

‘I don’t know why I’m crying. It was a long time ago,’ Madhav said in between sobs.

‘How long?’

‘Two years and three months. Three and a half months, actually.’

‘Since she left?’

‘Yes.’

He excused himself and went to the toilet. I made two cups of green tea. We had finished our first cup of chai a long time ago. He came out in a few minutes. He had washed his face.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I lost it.’

‘Here, have some more tea.’

I gave a cup to him. He took a sip.

‘What tea is this?’

‘Green tea.’

‘No milk? No sugar?’ he said. He looked at me like I was a vegetarian vampire.

‘It’s good for you,’ I said.

‘Is it? Anyway, thanks,’ he said.

‘So, Madhav. What happened then? You met the broker. You saw her empty house. Then? Did you try to find her?’

He nodded.

‘I did. I called her company. They said she had submitted her resignation and left, letting go of all her benefits in return for a shorter

notice period.'

'When did she resign?'

'A week before writing the letter to me.'

'So she knew she was leaving?' I said.

'Yes. When she told me to stay that night, she knew it was our last night together. She had planned it.'

He grew sad again.

'What else did you do?'

'I asked the company for the list of assigned doctors. I met them. They said Riya had come only once, when she first had a cough. After that she had preferred to consult with her family doctors.'

'In Delhi?'

'Yes. In fact, I went to Delhi.'

'To look for her?'

'I had to go there anyway, to complete the paperwork for the grant. I went to her house. She wasn't there.'

'You met her parents?'

'Her mother. Her father had passed away a month ago.'

He sipped his tea and turned silent.

'Did her mother know anything?' I said.

'No. She knew less than I did. According to her, Riya had called her and said she might do a meditation course. That is why her phone wasn't reachable, she told me.'

'You told her about the cancer?'

'Couldn't. I didn't have the guts to. I just expressed my condolences over her husband's death and left.'

'And you came back to Bihar?'

'Eventually, yes. Before that, I called every top hospital in Delhi to ask about Riya. Nobody knew where she was. I contacted her family doctor. He hadn't heard from her for years. I called her old friends from college. They had lost touch with her. I searched on the Internet; she wasn't on Facebook or any other site. I tried contacts at phone companies. I called the major yoga ashrams in the country. Nothing.'

His face fell. I could see he found this conversation difficult.

‘I tried for three months. I hoped she would call me one more time before she left this world. She didn't.’

‘You’re okay now?’

‘I was okay. Until these journals popped up. For the last two years, I have focused exclusively on the school. The grant has made us one of the best schools in the area, You should definitely come to visit.’

‘I will. Madhav, you loved her a lot, didn’t you?’

‘She is the only girl I ever loved. I don’t know if it is a lot, or less than a lot. I do know one thing, though.’

‘What?’

‘I will never love again. Ever.’

‘Why?’

‘Something is broken inside me. I don’t have the equipment or wiring or whatever one needs to fall in love anymore.’

I stood up from my chair and went to the bedside table. He continued to talk, more to himself than me.

‘I have my school. I have my mother. That is my life.’

I picked up the journals from the bedside table. I brought them to Madhav.

‘So how did you get these journals?’

‘Hemant called me. He had taken all of Riya’s stuff to the godown to sell it. However, he had missed a wooden box in the far corner of the kitchen loft. The loft was a storage space in the kitchen to keep dry groceries. A company took the house on lease after Riya. They used the apartment as a guest house. They almost never used the kitchen. Two years later, the company vacated the apartment and a family of four rented it. The lady of the family found the box and handed it to Hemant. Hemant, in turn, called me and handed me the box with the journals.’

I placed the journals in Madhav’s lap.

‘Here,’ I said, ‘take these.’

‘Why? I said I don’t want to. I can’t,’

‘Just take them,’ I said in a firm voice.

He kept his hand on the notebooks in his lap.

‘I have marked out six legible entries. You need to read them, buddy,’ I said.

‘No, no, no,’ he said and placed the books back on the dining table, ‘I told you, I can’t. I made myself get over her during these last two years. Now to read all this will only undo all that.’

‘Trust me, Madhav. You need to read them.’

RIYA’S JOURNAL:

Legible entry #1

1 November 2002

This journal is a birthday gift from me to me. It is my fifteenth birthday. Happy Birthday to me. I feel odd celebrating birthdays now. I am not a grownup, but I don’t feel like a child either.

They say people write secrets in journals. Should I write one down?

They say I am so quiet. Silent Riya. Mysterious Riya. Shy Riya.

I don’t answer them. All I want to say is, if you crush a flower before it blooms, will it ever bloom as bright later?

I was not quiet as a child. I became this way. Dad knows I changed. Dad knows I remember everything. Still, he pretends nothing happened. I do the same.

He hasn’t touched me for the last three years. He dare not.

I don’t know why I did not tell Mom. Maybe I didn’t even know if it was right or wrong at that time. What could she have done anyway?

Dad gave me a gold necklace today. I returned it. I find it difficult to talk to him. He tries to reach out, but I avoid him. He says I am still his daughter. I like writing in this journal. I am able to say things I never can otherwise. My brother is an idiot. So are Chacha ji and Taya ji’s boys. Spoilt brats, all of them. Just because they are boys, nobody tells them what to do. I hate these double standards.

Yeah, this journal does allow me to vent. Good night, journal.

Legible entry #2

15 December 2005

It's over. We are over.

Madhav and I, well, we never had anything as such. Whatever it was, it is over. He made me feel so cheap. All in Hindi. Crass Bihari Hindi. He's sick. I should have known. What was I thinking?

I actually hung out with him for a year. I let him kiss me. Yuck.

My friends were right. He is an idiot gawaar. I must have had a phase of insanity. Why else would I have even talked to him?

He was not fake, that's why.

But, all he wanted was to fuck me. Really, I know it sounds disgusting, but that is what he wanted. And imagine someone saying that to you in Hindi. Being told to fuck him or fuck off.

Well, mister, I am fucking off, for good. How dare you talk to me like that? I feel like smashing his head on the basketball court.

I told him I needed time. Lots of it. Well, he didn't want to waste time. Because his main purpose was sex. So he could tell his friends he nailed this rich chick.

Well, fuck off, says the rich chick.

Legible entry #3

4 September 2006

I said yes to Rohan. Yes, a month ago, when the proposal had come, I had called it the most bizarre idea ever. Rohan bhaiya and me? Had my mother lost her marbles? He was my rakhi brother, for God's sake. Not to mention I am just about turning nineteen and still in college.

But today I said yes. Well, it has been an eventful month. First,

the gifts that arrived from London every week. Louis Vuitton handbags, Chanel perfumes, Omega watches—Rohan sent them all, not just for me, but the entire family. My parents felt we may never get this good a match again. My mother said I didn't need to study more as Rohan's family was so rich.

I still didn't give in, until last night.

Yesterday, Rohan came down from London to Delhi. He came down for just four hours, only to see me. None of our parents know he did. He came and picked me up from Stephen's in the Bentley he keeps in India. We went for a long drive. He said he loves to travel, and I would make his best travel and life partner. He said he realized I was young, but I could continue to study in London. He had found out from Mom that I wanted to study music. He had brought a list of the top music schools in London with him.

Later, he went down on his knees. He took out a blue Tiffany's box. It had a giant three-carat diamond ring in it.

'It's still your choice,' he said. He put the ring back in the box and handed it to me. Finally, he said, 'Miss Riya Somani, the most beautiful person I know, inside and outside, since my childhood, will you marry me?'

So, dear journal, what's a girl to do?

That night, I took out the ring from the blue box and put it on. I showed it to Mom. She's still on the phone with Rohan's mother, hysterical with happiness.

I feel rushed, yes, but this time in a good way.

Legible entry #4 (Set of several entries from London)

4 April 2007

I came to London in the middle of the academic year for music schools. Also, they are so hard to get into. I have to prepare, apply, give tests'. It is going to take at least eight months.

Rohan's mother wants me to meet her friends for dinner tonight.

Every night there is someone to meet. These guys are social, and how I told her I should stay back because Rohan was not in town, but she said I have to come. Oh well, yet another party. Boring.

10 July 2007

Rohan travels all the time, and for a long time. He has just extended his trip by two weeks. I joined him for two days, and saw a bit of Istanbul. However, he's in meetings all day and it is no fun to roam around all alone after a while. Besides, Rohan's mom called me back. She was planning a party and the new daughter-in-law had to be there.

'So pretty,' one of her friends had said.

'Good you brought a girl from India. They listen to you,' said another.

6 September 2007

He came home drunk. He tried to hit me.

'Why didn't you take my call?' he yelled.

I was in music class. I had told him. I had messaged him right after.

'It's midnight, Rohan. What kind of business meetings happen so late?'

'Shut the fuck up, bitch. What do you know about work?'

'You will not talk to me like this.'

I turned around and walked away from him.

'You will not walk away from me like this.'

'You learn to talk and I will stay put.'

'I'm not drunk,' he slurred.

I turned to him. 'For your information, I'm twenty. I was studying in college. I left it to marry you.'

'You left it to live like a queen.'

'Rohan,' I said and paused to compose myself. 'I had a good life in India, too.'

'Somani Infra owned between three brothers versus my business? Girl, what are you comparing?'

'I am not comparing anything. I want you to stop making me out to be this gold-digger.'

He staggered and sat on the oversized grotesque sofa in the drawing room. 'Sit,' he said, patting the seat next to him.

I complied.

'Mom said you didn't talk to her properly when you were leaving home today.'

'Of course I did.'

'Is she lying?'

'I was late for class. She wanted me to go with her to the salon. I said we could go tomorrow.'

'You don't say that to my mother. Ever.'

'I had a class, Rohan.'

'What class? You haven't even got admitted to a college.'

'Yes, that's next year. I have joined prep classes for music. It isn't that easy to get admitted to one of these colleges. I've told you all this before.'

Rohan went up to the bar. He picked up a bottle.

'Stop,' I said and tried to take the bottle from him.

'What the fuck?' Rohan said. 'Let go. Now.'

He pushed me hard. I lost my balance and slipped. He bent over me. 'Don't touch me,' I said and pushed him away.

I miss home. I miss college. I miss not being told how to speak to someone else's mother.

Good night, journal. It is a good thing you aren't married.

7 September 2007

He has apologized. He said work stress was getting to him. 'I have a long way to go, Riya, I am nothing compared to the big hotel moguls of the world.'

'Why do you have to be a big hotel mogul?' I said.

But he began to speak of his mother. 'She's suffered a lot in life. My father did not treat her well. I want to be there for her.'

Hangovers make him senti.

11 January 2008

Wear only Indian clothes. Can you believe this? This is what Rohan's mom said to me today.

'If it makes her happy, do it. What difference does it make?' Rohan had said, as he chose from his two-dozen pairs of shoes this morning.

'Why?' I said. It isn't like I don't like Indian clothes. The point is, why does she get to tell me what to wear?

'You can get the best Indian designer clothes. You want me to send the hotel concierge? He will take you to the boutiques.'

'That's not the point, Rohan,' I said.

'Stop fussing. Her friends have certain expectations of her bahu. You nudged in yesterday wearing a short dress.'

'It was a regular dress, almost to my knees. Anyway, what if it was short? What is this? A family dress code?'

He snapped his fingers at me.

'Do it. Don't argue.'

This is what they call marital bliss, I guess.

18 March 2008

I made a mistake. A big, big mistake. I can't be in denial anymore. I made a mistake marrying Rohan.

11 June 2008

He slapped me in front of his mother, thrice. She didn't stop him. She kind of liked it. He even pulled my hair.

Should I go into the details? I don't think so. What is the point? Drunk husband, mother-in-law finding something to be pissed off about. This time it was about me seemingly ignoring her when she called me five times (I had headphones on, and was listening to my music tapes). Mother and son lectured me on how lucky I was, that Rohan was at least twenty times richer than my dad, and if I didn't behave there would be consequences.

But now comes the real news. Rohan was sleeping when his plum, buzzed at 3 a.m. He didn't wake up. It buzzed again. I feared if he woke up he would fight with me again. I was enjoying the night's

silence. So I walked up to the bedside table and picked up his phone to put it on silent. It buzzed again. A Whatsapp message flashed in the notifications. It was from someone called Kristin: Miss ur body honey. Wish I had u with me tonight.

Kristin had sent pictures of her body too.

I came back to bed. I didn't feel bad. In fact, I felt light. I had to make a tough decision and that decision had just been made for me.

Legible entry #5

13 June 2008

My marriage is over.

I left London without telling anyone and came home. I landed in Delhi this morning. When I told Mom everything, she wanted me to take the next flight back, and she had to call Dad. I told her I had decided I was not going back, no matter what Dad said.

'He seemed so nice,' Dad said at dinner without looking at me.

I explained Rohan to them. Rohan liked to conquer. Whether it is a hotel property or his wife, he liked the thrill of chasing more than what he chased.

'I said no to him. He had to have me. Once he did, he didn't care,' I said I skipped some stuff. I didn't say how he used to force himself on me when he was drunk. I didn't say anything about Rohan's mother asking her son to teach me a lesson, or about Kristin.

'Rohan's mother controls him. And she doesn't like me,' is all I said.

'Women have to learn to adjust, beta,' my mother said.

'Adjust? How does one adjust to violence?'

I lifted my left hand to show her the swelling. Rohan had pushed me and I had broken my wrist.

'What will people say?' Mom blurted out.

Let's find out.

Legible entry set #6

17 February 2009

Sometimes you need a knock on the head to come hack to your senses. I received it hard knock today. I don't know what happened to me yesterday. I kissed Madhav on the roof of his haveli. It made me forget reality. I started dreaming.

And how the dream crashed. Just when those silly feelings of 'this seems so right' started to take root, Rani Sahiha brought me back to my senses.

The signs were already there. How could I forget those disapproving glances from her in the living room? How idiotic of me to open up to her. Just because she was Madhav's mom, I thought she would also accept my past like Madhav did? She fed me litti-chokha. It didn't mean she liked me.

'Are you the girl he was involved with in college?' she asked me in the school staffroom today, when Madhav went to take his class. I didn't know what to say. I had no idea what Madhav had told her about me.

'We were good friends, yes,' I said.

'And now?' she said.

'Friends only. Nothing else, aunty' I said, a stammer in my voice.

'I know my son. He will get involved with you again.'

'Aunty, we do like each other but... '

'Stay out of his life,' she said shortly.

'Aunty, but...'

She stared at me.

'You are divorced. You must be desperate for another man. My son is handsome and a prince here. Of course, I can sense your plans.'

'Plans?'

'It is so easy for your type. One man didn't work out, so get another.'

If it were not Madhav's mother, I would have snapped back. I controlled myself.

'I don't want anyone,' I said.

'Then leave him. He is too weak for you.'

'I expect nothing,' I said. She handed me a tissue when she saw my tears. 'He does.'

Rani Sahiba folded her hands.

'He is all I have. If you stay here, he will never move on. You may be a big shot in Delhi. However, the Prince of Dumraon won't be with a Marwari divorcee. Respect in society is also worth something,' she said.

I wasn't respectable, I guess.

'What do you want me to do? Stop meeting him?'

'That won't be enough. He won't stop chasing you. You have done mayajal on him.'

Before I could answer, Madhav arrived. He pulled me by my hand to take me to the classroom.

Mayajal, an illusory trap. Nice one, Rani Sahiba.

5 March 2009

I'm in Delhi. Dad passed away last night.

I saw him in the ICU yesterday afternoon. He could barely talk. He said I had to meet Gupta uncle, his lawyer.

I went to Gupta uncle's office. He told me my father had stashed away some money for me in a secret account.

'Don't tell your brothers or anyone at home. They may sue and the matter will be stuck in the courts for years,' Gupta uncle said.

I signed the papers. I remained silent during the funeral.

I was in two minds. I knew why Dad was giving me the money. It was hush money, money for me to go away from his mind, from his conscience, from his guilt. But I told myself to be practical. I will need the money where I'm going.

Also, maybe I was ready to forget and move on. Not forgive, but forget.

14 April 2009

I leave in three days. No more drama. No more dealing with

another boy's mother. I don't want anyone's pity either. I am a divorcee. If that makes me tainted, so be it.

I am not upset with Rani Sahiba. I came to Patna to be alone. Madhav happened. Yes, he's nice. I know he loves me, and is falling for me more and more every day. I like him, too. Is that why I said yes to a job in Patna? Did I do so in the hope of meeting him again? Perhaps.

To be loved and to love is nice. However, right now, more than love, I want peace.

Madhav won't get it. He won't let go if I explain all this to him. I have been through it. He hasn't. He won't stop pursuing me. The simplest way out is if he thinks I am no longer an option.

I had a minor infection in Dumraon. So far, I have pretended it hasn't healed. Hence, when I leave, it will be more believable. Sure, he will be upset. However, he will get over it eventually and marry a princess sooner or later, who will come to him without a past, without deep dark secrets.

My fingers shake as I write this. I must stay strong. I have to type my parting note. I am faking my illness. Maybe I can at least be honest in my last letter and tell him how I feel about him...

He's coming home for the final rehearsal, it will be our last night together. Is it wrong if I make him stay over?

Chanakya Hotel, Patna

Madhav continued to stare at the last page long after he had read it, fists clenched.

‘What?’ he burst out and went silent.

He turned his gaze from the journal to me.

‘What is this, Chetan sir?’ he said.

‘Your friend’s journals, remember?’ I said.

He slammed the notebook shut, and took rapid shallow breaths. He buried his face in his hands, ran fingers through his thick, uncombed hair. He remained still until I touched his shoulder.

‘Are you all right?’ I said.

He looked at me in a dazed way. His face had turned an intense shade of red.

‘She’s alive,’ he mumbled.

‘That is what it seems like,’ I said.

‘She’s alive,’ he said again. His body began to shake uncontrollably.

‘So you see why I called you. You said she’s dead. You wanted to throw these journals away.’

‘How could she lie? Such a big lie.. .the bitch.’

He fought back tears.

‘Madhav, you said you loved her. What kind of language is this?’

‘I... I... ’ he said and stopped, unable to finish the sentence, the thought.

‘You’re in shock.’

‘She always does this. She runs away. The only way she deals with issues is by running away,’

He broke down then, tears in his stubble.

‘It took me years to get over her. I have still not healed, How could she...?’ he muttered to himself,.

‘At least you found out,’ I said.

‘She didn’t want me to. She wanted to dump me again.’

‘She wanted to protect herself. And you.’

‘Me? How did this protect me?’

‘She didn’t want to be a burden in your life.’

‘Riya could never be a burden in my life. She was my life,’

Madhav matter-of-factly.

I handed him a tissue. He crushed it in his hand instead of wiping his eyes.

‘Aren’t you happy she’s alive?’

‘I should be, but all I feel is anger right now.’

‘I can understand.’

‘Two years. Not a single day when I didn’t think of her.’

‘What are you going to do, Madhav?’ I said.

He ignored my question.

‘When she left, I almost needed to be treated for depression,’ he said, mostly to himself.

‘You went through a lot.’

‘Chetan sir, does what she did seem fair to you?’

‘I guess not. But life is complicated sometimes. She seemed to have her reasons.’

‘My mother? How is it even an issue? In fact, even my mother says Riya made me look more alive than anyone else.’

‘Riya had a bad experience. Once bitten and all that.’

‘I’m not Rohan.’

Like always, I had become over-involved in a situation. I needed to get home. It was Madhav Jha who had to plan what to do next.

He seemed lost in thought. I stood up to pack my bags.

‘Can I stay for some more time?’ he said.

‘Sure,’ I said, shrugging my shoulders. He went to a corner of the room to make a phone call. I zipped up my suitcase. He returned after a few minutes.

‘I called her home in Delhi. Her mother says she has not heard

from her in years,' Madhav said.

'She really has disappeared from everywhere,' I said.

I lifted my bag from the bed and placed it on the ground. I pulled out the rod of my strolley.

'I'm sorry. This is the only flight to Mumbai today.'

'Thank you for whatever you did.'

'I did nothing.'

'Can I accompany you to the airport?'

*

We sat in the car in silence. He spoke after passing two traffic signals. 'I'll find her,' Madhav said in a calm but decisive voice.

I looked at him.

'Are you serious?'

'Yes.'

'Where could she be?'

'I have a hunch. She always used to mention her dream. To be a singer in a small bar in New York.'

'So?'

'If she has cut herself off from the entire world, wouldn't she finally want to pursue her dream?'

'How can you be sure? Where in New York? Or maybe she found another city? Or maybe she is doing something else?' I said.

'So you think I shouldn't look?'

'I'm just being realistic. Sorry, I didn't mean to discourage you.'

We remained silent for the rest of the drive. We reached the Lok Nayak Jayaprakash Airport. He helped me load my bag on the trolley. I told myself to withdraw from this situation. I couldn't.

'Keep in touch,' I said, as the security guard at the entrance checked my photo ID and ticket.

'I will, sir.'

'You really are going to look for her?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Even though you may never find her and end up in more pain?'

He nodded.

‘I can’t quit, sir. It’s not in my genes to do so.’

After Chetan Bhagat left, I remained in Patna for a while. I met as many people as I could from Riya's past.

First, I went to her old office.

'She resigned but did not tell us her plans,' Mohini, her ex-colleague at Nestle, told me.

'Did she seem sick?'

'Not really,' Mohini said.

I visited East India Travels, the agency Nestle's staff used.

'You remember Riya Somani? She worked at Nestles Patna office two years ago,' I said.

'Pretty girl?' said Ajay, the young agent at the travel agency.

'Extremely pretty,' I corrected him.

'Madam did use this agency. Her father had become quite sick. Round trip to Delhi, right?' Ajay said.

'Yes, anything after that?' I said.

Ajay pounded his keyboard. He shook his head a couple of times.

'Anything?'

'Trying,' Ajay said and spoke after a minute. 'I have something. She took another flight to Delhi. One way. On 17 April 2009.'

I checked the screen. She had flown out the same day as the Bill Gates talk.

I went to the car-hire company. However, they didn't maintain old records so they had no idea.

I went to Kotak Mahindra Bank, where Riya had her salary credited. I met Roshan Joshi, the branch manager.

'Client information is confidential,' he said.

'She disappeared. I'm trying to find her.'

'Is she missing? Do you have a police report? We could help then.'

'She went on her own.'

'Sir, how can I reveal someone's bank account information?'

I hated doing this, but I called MLA Ojha from the branch

manager's office. Ojha loved to do favours so he could ask for one in return later. He asked the Patna city MLA to give Roshan a call.

Five minutes later, I had Riya's accounts.

'Sorry, I didn't know you knew our MLA, sir...' Roshan said.

I scanned her statements. On 14 April, Riya had withdrawn the entire balance of three-and-a-half lakhs. The transaction had 'FX' written next to it.

'What is FX?' I said.

Roshan looked at the account statement.

'It's foreign exchange conversion. She has withdrawn the funds in another currency.'

'Which currency?'

'US dollars.'

'To travel to the US?' I said. The lamp of hope flickered in me.

'We don't know. Indians often take US dollars to whichever country they are visiting, and change it there.'

'She has travelled abroad. Right?'

'That's likely.'

I left the bank and called Ajay at East India Travels.

'Ajay, Madhav Jha here. I need to book a flight to Delhi, please.'

*

'Ah, lucky, lucky girl,' Samantha said.

'Is she?' I said. 'Married at nineteen. Divorced at twenty'

Samantha and I sat in the American Diner at the India Habitat Centre in Delhi. She swirled the straw in her orange juice as I told her Riya's story.

'That is indeed tragic,' she said. 'However, she is lucky to have you love her so much.'

I smiled.

'Madhav, most girls would kill for a lover like you. I would,' Samantha said.

'Thanks,' I said.

She took a deep breath. The waiter came with out food—a chicken

burger and a large order of French fries.

‘Anyway, so what can I do for you?’ Samantha said, a fry in one hand.

‘I have to find her. Nobody seems to know where she is.’

‘That’s not a great place to start. Any clues?’

‘I have a hunch.’

‘Like an intuition?’

‘Well, a guess. A decent calculated guess. She could be in New York.’

‘Oh, really? That’s my city.’

‘I’m not sure. I have to first confirm it is the US.’

‘How?’

‘The US consulate. I need to find out if they issued a visa to Riya Somani. Do you have contacts there, through your American circle in Delhi?’

‘I do. But that sort of stuff is confidential.’

‘I don’t need details. I just need to know if they issued a visa to her and when.’

‘It’s...difficult.’

‘That’s why I’ve come to you.’

She finished every single fry as she considered my request. She took out her phone and flipped through the contacts list.

‘There’s Angela at the US consulate. We hang out sometimes. I can’t promise anything.’

‘That’s fine. Whatever is possible.’

*

‘The best rural school in Bihar. That is super news, Madhav. You have any documents to show that the CM said that?’ Michael Young, the CEO of Gates Foundation India, said.

I sat in his sunny office. It had a view of the trees on Lodhi Road. Over the last two years, I had interacted with Michael on several occasions, and received delegations on his behalf to my school, ‘I have local newspaper articles. I can send you scanned copies,’ I said.

‘That would be wonderful. Little me will look good to my bosses in New York,’ Michael said and winked at me. Americans can make you feel you are their best friend in the whole world, ‘I need a favour, Michael,’ I said.

‘Sure.’

‘I need to be in New York for a while. Can the foundation give me a job, an internship, anything for a few months?’

Michael raised his eyebrows. ‘Really?’

‘Yes. I will go anyway. However, it will help if I have a base there and some income to survive.’

‘Bihar to New York. Is everything okay? You seemed so passionate about your school.’

‘I am. I need to look for someone in New York. That’s all. Of course, an internship would be a great experience.’

Michael tugged at his lower lip.

‘Well, I will put you in touch with people in the US,’ Michael said, ‘and put in a word, too.’

‘Thanks, Michael,’ I said and shook his hand.

‘No problem. Don’t forget to send me the scanned articles,’ he said.

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‘The things you make me do,’ Samantha said. She passed me a sheet of paper. It was early in the morning in Lodi Gardens, next to her office. Brisk morning walkers strode past us.

I looked at the sheet. It was a copy of a US visa.

‘She applied, and the consulate granted her a visa on 5 April.’

‘Thanks, Samantha.’

‘My friend could get into a lot of trouble for this.’

‘I owe you,’ I said.

She looked at me with her deep grey eyes.

‘No, you don’t. Hope this is helpful.’

‘It tells me my hunch could be right.’

‘But it doesn’t say which city in the US. Or if she went at all.’

‘New York. She always wanted to go there.’

‘Ah, no wonder Michael said you have applied for an internship there.’