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Chapter 2

Sailing Down the Sarayu

‘Tell Princess Anandmayi,’ said Parvateshwar to the Captain of the Women’s Guard at Anandmayi’s palace entrance, ‘that General Parvateshwar is waiting outside.’

‘She had told me she was expecting you, General,’ said the Captain bowing low. ‘May I request you to wait a moment while I go and check on her?’

As the Captain walked into Anandmayi’s chamber, Parvateshwar turned around. Shiva had made him in-charge of the expedition to Kashi. Shiva knew if he left the organisation to one of Ayodhya’s administrators, they would probably be debating the mode of transport for the next three years. Parvateshwar, with his typical Suryavanshi efficiency, had seen to the arrangements within a week. The contingent was to travel east down the Sarayu on royal boats, to the city of Magadh, where the river merged into the mighty Ganga. From there, they would turn west to sail up the Ganga to *Kashi, the city where the supreme light shines*.

Parvateshwar had been inundated with inane requests from some of the Ayodhya nobility who were taking the opportunity to travel with the Neelkanth. He did plan to honour some strange appeals, like one from a superstitious nobleman who wanted his boat to leave exactly thirty two minutes after the beginning of the third prahar. Others he had flatly refused, such as a request from another nobleman for his boat to be staffed only by women. The General was quite sure that Anandmayi must also have some special arrangements she wanted made.

Like carrying a ship hold of milk for her beauty baths!

The Captain was back shortly. ‘You may go in, General.’

Parvateshwar marched in smartly, bowed his head, saluted as he must to royalty and spoke out loud, ‘What is it you want, Princess?’

‘You needn’t be so coy, General. You can look up.’

Parvateshwar looked up. Anandmayi was lying on her stomach next to a picture window overlooking the royal gardens. Kanini, her masseuse, was working her magic on the princess’ exotic and supple body. Anandmayi only had one piece of cloth draped loosely from her lower back to her upper thighs. The rest of her, a feast for his eyes.

‘Beautiful view, isn’t it?’ asked Anandmayi.

Parvateshwar blushed a deep red, his head bowed, eyes turned away. To Anandmayi, he appeared to be like the rare cobra male that bows his head to its mate at the beginning of their mating dance, as though accepting the superiority of its partner.

‘I’m sorry, Princess. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to insult you.’

‘Why should you apologise for looking at the royal gardens, General? It is allowed.’

Parvateshwar, a lifelong celibate, was mollified. It did not appear as though Anandmayi had misunderstood his intentions. He whispered in a soft voice, eyes on the floor, ‘What can I do for you, Princess?’

‘It’s quite simple really. A little further south down the Sarayu is the spot where Lord Ram had stopped with his Guru Vishwamitra and brother Lakshman on his way to slay the demon Tadaka. It is the spot where Maharishi Vishwamitra taught Lord Ram the arts of Bal and Atibal, the fabled route to eternal good health and freedom from hunger and thirst. I would like to halt there and offer a puja to the Lord.’

Parvateshwar, pleased at her devotion to Lord Ram, smiled. ‘Of course, we can stop there Princess. I will make the arrangements. Would you need any special provisions?’

'None whatsoever. An honest heart is all that is needed for a prayer to reach the Lord.' Parvateshwar looked up for a brief moment, impressed. Anandmayi's eyes, however, seemed to be mocking him. He growled softly. 'Anything else, Princess?' Anandmayi grimaced. She was not getting the reaction that she had desired. 'Nothing else, General.'

Parvateshwar saluted smartly and left the room.

Anandmayi kept staring at Parvateshwar's retreating form. She sighed loudly and shook her head.

'Gather around please,' said the Pandit, 'we will commence the puja.'

Shiva's contingent was at Bal-Atibal kund, where Guru Vishwamitra had taught Lord Ram his legendary skills.

The Neelkanth was unhappy that many of Ayodhya's nobility had inveigled their way into the voyage to Kashi. What should have been a super-fast five ship convoy had turned into a lethargic fifty ship caravan. The straightforward Parvateshwar had found it difficult to deny the convoluted logic of the Chandravanshi nobility. Therefore, Shiva was delighted that Bhagirath had found an ingenious method to cut down the numbers. Craftily, he had suggested to one noble that he should rush to Kashi and set up a welcoming committee for the Neelkanth, and thus gain favour with the powerful Lord. Seeing one noble hustle away, many others had followed, in a mad dash to be the first to herald the arrival of the Neelkanth at Kashi. Within hours, the convoy had been reduced to the size that Shiva desired.

The puja platform had been set up some fifty metres from the riverbank. It was believed that anyone who conducted this prayer with full devotion would never be inflicted with disease. Shiva, Sati, Parvateshwar, Ayurvati, Bhagirath and Anandmayi sat in the innermost circle next to the Pandit. Others like Nandi, Veerbhadra, Drapaku, Krittika and the men of the joint Suryavanshi-Chandravanshi brigade sat a little further back. The earnest Brahmin was reciting Sanskrit shlokas in the exact same intonations that had been taught to him by his Guru.

Sati was uneasy. She had an uncomfortable feeling that someone was watching her. For some strange reason, she felt intense hatred directed at her. Along with that she also felt boundless love and profound sadness. Confused, she opened her eyes. She turned her head to her left. Every single person had his eyes closed, in accordance with the guidelines of this particular puja. She then turned to the right and started as she saw Shiva gazing directly at her. His eyes open wide, reflecting an outpouring of love, Shiva's face sported a slight smile.

Sati frowned at her husband, gesturing with her eyes that he should concentrate on his prayers. Shiva, however, pursed his lips together and blew her a kiss. A startled Sati frowned even more. Her Suryavanshi sensibilities felt offended at such frivolous behaviour, which she considered a violation of the code. Shiva pouted like a spoilt child, closed his eyes and turned towards the fire. Sati turned too, eyes closed, allowing herself a slight smile at the fact that she had been blessed with an adoring husband.

But she still felt she was being watched. Stared at intently.

The last ship of the Neelkanth's convoy turned round the bend in the Sarayu. With his enemies out of sight, the Naga emerged from the trees. He walked briskly to the place where the Brahmin had just conducted the puja. He was followed by the Queen of the Nagas and a hundred armed men. They stopped at a polite distance from the Naga, leaving him alone.

Karkotak, Prime Minister to the Queen of the Nagas, looked up at the sky, judging the time. Then he looked disconcertedly at the Naga in the distance. He wondered why the Lord of the People, as the Naga was referred to in his lands, was so interested in this particular puja. The Lord had far greater powers and knowledge. Some even considered him better than the Naga Queen.

'Your Highness,' said Karkotak to the Queen, 'do you think it advisable to emphasise to the Lord of the People the importance of returning home?'

'When I want your advice, Karkotak,' said the Queen in a curt whisper, 'I will ask for it.' Karkotak immediately retreated, terrified as always of his Queen's temper.

The Queen turned back towards the Naga, her mind considering Karkotak's words. She had to admit that her Prime Minister was right. The Nagas had to return to their capital quickly. There was little time to waste. The *Rajya Sabha*, the Naga *Royal Council* was to be held soon. The issue of medical support to the Brangas would come up again. She knew that the severe cost of that support was turning many Nagas against the alliance with the Brangas, especially the peace-loving ones who wanted to live their ostracised lives quietly, calling it a product of their bad karma. And without the alliance, her vengeance was impossible. More importantly, she could not desert the Brangas in their hour of need when they had been unflinchingly loyal to her.

On the other hand, she could not abandon her nephew, the Lord of the People. He was troubled; the presence of that vile woman had disturbed his usual calm demeanour. He was taking unnecessary risks. Like the idiotic attack on Sati and Shiva at the Ramjanmabhoomi temple. If he didn't want to kill her, why the hell did he put his own person in such grave peril? What if he had been killed? Or worse, caught alive? He had justified it later as an attempt to draw Sati out of Ayodhya, as capturing her within the city was impossible. For what it was worth, he had succeeded in drawing her out on a voyage to Kashi. But she was accompanied by her husband and a whole brigade. It was impossible to kidnap her.

The Queen saw her nephew move slightly. She stepped forward a little distance, motioning for Karkotak and the men to remain behind.

The Naga had taken out a knife from a newly built hold on his belt. It was the knife Sati had flung at him at the Ramjanmabhoomi temple. He looked at it longingly, letting the blade run up his thumb. Its sharp edge cut his skin lightly. He shook his head angrily, dug the knife hard into the sand and turned around to walk towards the Queen.

He stopped abruptly. Oddly hesitant.

The Queen, clearly out of her nephew's earshot, willed her thoughts in a quiet whisper. 'Let it go, my child. It's not worth it. Let it go.'

The Naga stood rooted to his spot. Indecision weighed heavy on him. The men in the distance were shocked to see their Lord in such a weak state. To the Queen's dismay, the Naga turned around and walked back to the spot where he had buried the knife. He picked it up carefully, held it reverentially to his forehead and put it back into his side hold.

The Queen snorted in disgust and turned around, signalling Karkotak to come forward. She knew she had no choice. She would have to leave her nephew with bodyguards, while she herself would ride out towards Panchavati, her capital.

'Portage charges? What rubbish!' bellowed Siamantak, Ayodhya's Prime Minister. 'This ship belongs to the Emperor of Swadweep. It carries a very important individual, the most important in the land.'

Siamantak was in the pilot boat of Andhak, Port Minister of Magadh, who unlike typical Chandravanshis, was known to turn a blind eye to everything except the letter of the law. Siamantak turned to look nervously at the massive ship that carried the Neelkanth. Shiva was standing on the balustrade with Parvateshwar and Bhagirath. Siamantak was aware that Shiva wanted to stop at Magadh. He had expressed a desire to visit the Narsimha temple on the outskirts of the city. Siamantak did not want to disappoint the Neelkanth. However, if he paid portage charges for the ship, it would set a dangerous precedent. How could the Emperor's ship pay portage in his own empire? It would open a can of worms with all the river port kingdoms across the empire. The negotiations with Andhak were delicate.

'I don't care who the ship belongs to,' said Andhak. 'And I don't care if you have Lord Ram himself on that ship. The law is the law. Any ship that ports at Magadh has to pay portage. Why should Emperor Dilipa be worried about a small fee of one thousand gold coins?'

'It's not the money. It's the principle,' argued Siamantak.

'Precisely! It is the principle. So please pay up.'

Shiva was getting impatient. 'What the hell are they talking about for so long?'

'My Lord,' said Bhagirath. 'Andhak is the Port Minister. He must be insisting that the law of portage charges be followed. Siamantak cannot allow any ship owned by my father to pay portage. It is an insult to my father's fragile ego. Andhak is an idiot.'

'Why would you call a person who follows the law stupid?' frowned Parvateshwar. 'On the contrary, he should be respected.'

'Sometimes even circumstances should be looked at, General.'

'Prince Bhagirath, I can understand no circumstance under which the letter of the law should be ignored.'

Shiva did not want to witness yet another argument between the Suryavanshi and Chandravanshi way of life. 'What kind of ruler is the King of Magadh?'

'King *Mahendra*?' asked Bhagirath.

'Doesn't that mean *the conqueror of the world*?'

'Yes, it does, My Lord. But he does not do justice to that name. Magadh was a great kingdom once. In fact, there was a time when it was the overlord kingdom of Swadweep and its kings were widely respected and honoured. But as it happens with many great kings, their unworthy descendants frittered away the wealth and power of their kingdoms. They have been trying hard to live up to Magadh's past glory, but have been spectacularly unsuccessful. We share a prickly relationship with them.'

'Really, why?'

'Well, Ayodhya was the kingdom that defeated them more than three hundred years ago to become the overlord of Swadweep. It was a glorious Ashwamedh Yagna, for this was a time when Ayodhya had still not fallen prey to the wooden kings who rule it today. As you can imagine, Magadh was not quite pleased about the loss of status and revenue from tributes.'

'Yes, but three hundred years is a long time to carry a grudge!'

Bhagirath smiled. 'Kshatriyas have long memories, My Lord. And they still suffer from their defeat to Ayodhya. Magadh could theoretically benefit from the fact that it is at the confluence of two rivers. It becomes the most convenient trading hub for merchants travelling on river ports on the Sarayu or the Ganga. This advantage was negated after they lost the Ashwamedh to us. A ceiling was imposed on their portage and trading hub charges. And then, our enmity received a fresh lease of life a hundred years back.'

'And how did that happen?'

'There is a kingdom to the west, up the Ganga, called Prayag. It had historically been in close alliance with Magadh. In fact the ruling families are very closely related.'

'And...'

'And when the Yamuna changed course from Meluha and started flowing into Swadweep, it met the Ganga at Prayag,' said Bhagirath.

'That would have made Prayag very important?' asked Shiva.

'Yes, My Lord. Just like Magadh, it became a crucial junction for river trade. And unlike Magadh, it was not bound by any treaty on its portage and trading charges. Any trader or kingdom wanting to settle or trade in the newly opened hinterlands of the Yamuna had to pay charges at Prayag. Its prosperity and power grew exponentially. There were even rumours that they were planning to support Magadh in an Ashwamedh Yagna to challenge Ayodhya's suzerainty. But when my great grandfather lost the battle to the Suryavanshis and a dam was built on the Yamuna to turn the flow towards Meluha,

Prayag's importance fell again. They have blamed Ayodhya ever since. They actually believe we purposely lost the war to give them a devastating blow.'

'I see.'

'Yes,' said Bhagirath, shaking his head. 'But to be honest, we lost the war because my great grandfather employed terrible battle strategy.'

'So you people have hated each other forever?'

'Not forever, My Lord. There was a time when Ayodhya and Magadh were close allies.'

'So will you be welcome here?'

Bhagirath burst out laughing. 'Everyone knows I don't really represent Ayodhya. This is one place I will not be suspect. But King Mahendra is known to be highly suspicious. We should expect spies keeping a close tab on us all the time. He does that to every important visitor. Having said that, their spy network is not particularly efficient. I do not foresee any serious problems.'

'Will my blue neck open doors here?'

Bhagirath looked embarrassed. 'King Mahendra does not believe in anything my father believes in, My Lord. Since the Emperor of Ayodhya believes in the Neelkanth, the Magadh king will not.'

Their conversation was interrupted by Siamantak climbing up the ship ladder. He came up to the Neelkanth, saluted smartly and said, 'A deal has been struck, My Lord. We can disembark. But we will have to stay here for at least ten days.'

Shiva frowned.

'I have temporarily transferred the ownership of the ship to a palace guesthouse owner in Magadh, My Lord. We will stay in his guesthouse for ten days. He will pay the portage charges to Andhak from the guesthouse rent we pay. When we wish to leave, the ownership of the ship will be transferred back to King Dilipa. We have to stay for ten days so that the guesthouse owner can earn enough money for his own profit and for portage charges.'

Shiva gaped at Siamantak. He didn't know whether to laugh at this strangely convoluted compromise or be impressed at Siamantak's bureaucratic brilliance in achieving Shiva's objective of visiting Magadh while upholding his Emperor's prestige. The portage charges would be paid, but technically not by Emperor Dilipa.

The Naga and his soldiers had been silently tracking the fleet carrying Shiva, Sati and their entourage. The Naga Queen, Prime Minister Karkotak and her bodyguards had left for Panchavati, the Naga capital. The smaller platoon allowed the Naga to maintain a punishing pace, staying abreast with the fast moving ships of Shiva's convoy.

They had wisely remained away from the banks. Far enough to not be visible to the boat look-outs but close enough to follow their paths. They had moved further inland to avoid Magadh and intended to move closer to the river once they had bypassed the city. 'A short distance more, My Lord,' said Vishwadyumna. 'Then we can move back towards the river.'

The Naga nodded.

Suddenly, the still of the forest was shattered by a loud scream. 'NOOOOO!'

The Naga immediately went down on his knees, giving Vishwadyumna rapid orders with hand signals. The entire platoon went down quickly and quietly, waiting for the danger to pass.

But trouble had just begun.

A woman screamed again. 'No! Please! Leave him!'

Vishwadyumna silently gestured to his soldiers to stay down. As far as he was concerned, there was only one course of action to take. Retrace their steps, take a wide arc around this area and move back towards the river. He turned towards his Lord, about to offer this suggestion. The Naga, however, was transfixed, eyes glued to a heartbreaking sight.

At a distance, partially hidden by the trees and underbrush, lay a tribal woman, frantically clutching a boy, no older than six or seven years. Two armed men, possibly Magadhan soldiers, were trying to pull the child away. The woman, showing astounding strength for her frail frame, was holding on to the child desperately.

'Dammit!' screamed the leader of the Magadhans. 'Push that woman off, you louts!'

In the wild and unsettled lands between the Ganga and Narmada lived scattered tribes of forest people. In the eyes of the civilised city folk living along the great rivers, these tribals were backward creatures because they insisted on living in harmony with nature. While most kingdoms ignored these forest tribes, others confiscated their lands at will as populations grew and need for farmlands increased. And a few particularly cruel ones preyed on these helpless groups for slave labour.

The Magadhan leader kicked the woman hard. 'You can get another son! But I need this boy! He will drive my bulls to victory! My father will finally stop his endless preening about winning every race for the last three years!'

The Naga looked at the Magadhan with barely concealed hate. Bull-racing was a craze in the Chandravanshi areas, subject to massive bets, royal interest and intrigue. Riders were needed to scream and agitate the animals to keep them running on course. At the same time, if the riders were too heavy, they would slow down the animal. Therefore, boys between the ages of six and eight were considered perfect. They would shriek out of fear and their weight was inconsequential. The children would be tied to the beasts. If the bull went down, the boy rider would be seriously injured or killed. Therefore, tribal children were often kidnapped to slave away as riders. Nobody important missed them if they died.

The Magadhan leader nodded to one of his men who drew his sword. He then looked at the woman. 'I am trying to be reasonable. Let your son go. Or I will have to hurt you.'

'No!'

The Magadhan soldier slashed his sword, cutting across the mother's right arm. Blood spurted across the child's face, making him bawl inconsolably.

The Naga was staring at the woman, his mouth open in awe. Her bloodied right arm hanging limply by her side, the woman still clung to her son, wrapping her left arm tightly around him.

Vishwadyumna shook his head. He could tell it was a matter of time before the woman would be killed. He turned towards his soldiers, giving hand signals to crawl back. He turned back towards his Lord. But the Naga was not there. He had moved swiftly forward, towards the mother. Vishwadyumna panicked and ran after his Lord, keeping his head low.

'Kill her!' ordered the Magadhan leader.

The Magadhan soldier raised his sword, ready to strike. Suddenly, the Naga broke out from the cover of the trees, his hand holding a knife high. Before the soldier knew what had happened, the knife struck his hand and his sword dropped harmlessly to the ground.

As the Magadhan soldier shrieked in agony, the Naga drew out two more knives. But he had failed to notice the platoon of Magadhan soldiers at the back. One had his bow at the ready, with an arrow strung. The soldier released it at the Naga. The arrow rammed into his left shoulder, slipping between his shoulder cap and torso armour, bursting through to the bone. The force of the blow caused the Naga to fall to the ground, the pain immobilising him.

Seeing their Lord down, the Naga's platoon ran in with a resounding yell.

'My Lord!' cried Vishwadyumna, as he tried to support the Naga back to his feet.

'Who the hell are you?' screamed the cruel Magadhan leader, retreating towards the safety of his platoon, before turning back to the Naga's men.

'Get out of here if you want to stay alive!' shouted one of the Naga's soldiers, livid at the

injury to his Lord.

'Bangas!' yelled the Magadhan, recognising the accent. 'What in the name of Lord Indra are you scum doing here?'

'It's Branga! Not Banga!'

'Do I look like I care? Get out of my land!'

The Branga did not respond as he saw his Naga Lord getting up slowly, helped by Vishwadyumna. The Naga signalled Vishwadyumna to step back and tried to pull the arrow out of his shoulder. But it was buried too deep. He broke its shaft and threw it away.

The Magadhan pointed at the Naga menacingly. 'I am Ugrasen, the Prince of Magadh. This is my land. These people are my property. Get out of the way.'

The Naga did not respond to the royal brat.

He turned around to see one of the most magnificent sights he had ever seen. The mother lay almost unconscious behind his soldiers. Her eyes closing due to the tremendous loss of blood. Her body shivering desperately. Too terrified to even whimper.

And yet, she stubbornly refused to give up her son. Her left hand still wrapped tight around him. Her body protectively positioned in front of her child.

What a mother!

The Naga turned around. His eyes blazing with rage. His body tense. His fists clenched tight. He whispered in a voice that was eerily calm, 'You want to hurt a mother because she is protecting her child?'

Sheer menace dripped from that soft voice. It even managed to get through to a person lost in royal ego. But Ugrasen could not back down in front of his fawning courtiers. Some crazy Branga with an unseasonal holi mask was not going to deprive him of his prize catch. 'This is my kingdom. I can hurt whoever I want. So if you want to save your sorry hide, get out of here. You don't know the power of...'

'YOU WANT TO HURT A MOTHER BECAUSE SHE IS PROTECTING HER CHILD?'

Ugrasen fell silent as terror finally broke through his thick head. He turned to see his followers. They too felt the dread that the Naga's voice emanated.

A shocked Vishwadyumna stared at his Lord. He had never heard his Lord raise his voice so loud. Never. The Naga's breathing was heavy, going intermittently through gritted teeth. His body stiff with fury.

And then Vishwadyumna heard the Naga's breathing return slowly to normal. He knew it instantly. His Lord had made a decision.

The Naga reached to his side and drew his long sword. Holding it away from his body. Ready for the charge. And then he whispered his orders. 'No mercy.'

'NO MERCY!' screamed the loyal Branga soldiers. They charged after their Lord. They fell upon the hapless Magadhans. There was no mercy.

ACT I

Delhi

1

Where?’ I gasped, trying to catch my breath.

I had two minutes left for my interview to start and I couldn’t ad the room. Lost, I stopped whoever I could in the confusing corridors of St. Stephens College to ask for directions.

Most students ignored me. Many sniggered. I wondered why. Well, now I know. My accent. Back in 2004, my English was Bihari. I don’t want to talk now like I did back then. It’s embarrassing. It wasn’t English. It was 90 per cent Bihari Hindi mixed with 10 per cent really bad English. For instance, this is what I had actually said: ‘Cumty room...bat!aieyega zara? Hamara interview hai na wahan... Mera khel ka kota hai. Kis taraf hai?’

If I start speaking the way I did in those days, you’ll get a headache. So I’m going to say everything in English, just imagine my words in Bhojpuri-laced Hindi, with the worst possible English thrown in.

‘Where you from, man?’ said a boy with hair longer than most girls.

‘Me Madhav Jha from Dumraon, Bihar.’

His friends laughed. Over time, I learnt that people often ask what they call a ‘rhetorical’ question—something they ask just to make a point, not expecting an answer. Here, the point was to demonstrate that I was an alien amongst them.

‘What are you interviewing for? Peon?’ the long-haired boy said and laughed.

I didn’t know enough English back then to be offended. Also, I was in a hurry. ‘You know where it is?’ I said instead, looking at his group of friends. They all seemed to be the rich, English types. Another boy, short and fat, seemed to take pity on me and replied, ‘Take a left at the corner of the main red building and you’ll find a sign for the committee room.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. This I knew how to say in English.

‘Can you read the sign in English?’ the boy with the long hair said. His friends told him to leave me alone. I followed the fat boy’s instructions and ran towards the red building.

I faced the first interview of my life. Three old men sat in front of me. They looked like they had not smiled since their hair had turned grey.

I had learnt about wishing people before an interview. I had even practised it. ‘Good morning, sir.’

‘There are a few of us here,’ said the man in the middle. He seemed to be around fifty-five years old and wore square, black-rimmed glasses and a checked jacket.

‘Good morning, sir, sir and sir,’ I said.

They smiled. I didn’t think it was a good smile. It was the high-class-to-low-class smile. The smile of superiority, the smile of delight that they knew English and I didn’t.

Of course, I had no choice but to smile back.

The man in the middle was Professor Pereira, the head of sociology, the course I had applied for. Professor Fernandez, who taught physics, and Professor Gupta, whose subject was English, sat on his left and right respectively.

‘Sports quota, eh?’ Prof. Pereira said. ‘Why isn’t Yadav here?’

‘I’m here, sir,’ a voice called out from behind me. I turned around to see a man in a tracksuit standing at the door. He looked too old to be a student but too young to be faculty.

‘This one is 85 per cent your decision,’ Prof. Pereira said.

‘No way, sir. You are the final authority.’ He sat down next to the professors. Piyush Yadav was the sports coach for the college and sat in on all sports-quota interviews. He seemed simpler and friendlier than the professors. He didn’t have a fancy accent either.

‘Basketball?’ Prof. Fernandez asked, scanning through my file.

‘Yes, sir,’ I said.

‘What level?’

‘State.’

‘Do you speak in full sentences?’ Prof. Gupta said in a firm voice. I didn’t fully understand his question. I kept quiet.

‘Do you?’ he asked again.

‘Yes, yes,’ I said, my voice like a convict’s.

‘So...why do you want to study at St. Stephen’s?’

A few seconds of silence followed. The four men in the room looked at me. The professor had asked me a standard question.

‘I want good college,’ I said, after constructing the sentence in my head.

Prof. Gupta smirked. ‘That is some response. And why is St. Stephen’s a good college?’

I switched to Hindi. Answering in English would require pauses and make me come across as stupid. Maybe I *was* stupid, but I did not want them to know that.

‘Your college has a big name. It is famous in Bihar also,’ I said.

‘Can you please answer in English?’ Prof. Gupta said.

‘Why? You don’t know Hindi?’ I said in reflex, and in Hindi.

I saw my blunder in their horrified faces. I had not said it in defiance; I really wanted to know why they had to interview me in English when I was more comfortable in Hindi. Of course, I didn’t know then that Stephen’s professors didn’t like being asked to speak in Hindi.

‘Professor Pereira, how did this candidate get an interview?’ Prof. Gupta said.

Prof. Pereira seemed to be the kindest of the lot. He turned to me. ‘We prefer English as the medium of instruction in our college, that’s all.’

Without English, I felt naked. I started thinking about my return trip to Bihar. I didn’t belong here—these English-speaking monsters would eat me alive. I was wondering what would be the best way to take their leave when Piyush Yadav broke my chain of thought.

‘Bihar se ho? Are you from Bihar?’ he said.

The few words in Hindi felt like cold drops of rain on a scorching

summer's day. I loved Piyush Yadav in that instant.

‘Yes, sir. Dumraon.’

‘I know. Three hours from Patna, right?’ he said.

‘You know Dumraon?’ I said. I could have kissed his feet. The three English-speaking monsters continued to stare.

‘I’m from Patna. Anyway, tell them about your achievements in basketball,’ Piyush said.

I nodded. He sensed my nervousness and spoke again. ‘Take your time. I am Hindi-medium, too. I know the feeling.’

The three professors looked at Piyush as if wondering how he had ever managed to get a job at the college.

I composed myself and spoke my rehearsed lines.

‘Sir, I have played state-level basketball for six years. Last year, I was in the waiting list for the BFI national team.’

‘BFI?’ said Prof. Gupta.

‘Basketball Federation of India,’ Piyush answered for me, even though I knew the answer.

‘And you want to do sociology. Why?’ Prof. Fernandez said.

‘It’s an easy course, No need to study. Is that it?’ Prof. Gupta remarked.

I didn’t, know whether Gupta had something against me, was generally grumpy or suffered from constipation.

‘I am from rural area.’

‘I am from a rural area,’ Gupta said, emphasizing the ‘a’ as if omitting it was a criminal offence.

‘Hindi, sir? Can I explain in Hindi?’

Nobody answered. I had little choice. I took my chances and responded in my language. ‘My mother runs a school and works with the villagers. I wanted to learn more about our society. Why are our villages so backward? Why do we have so many differences based on caste and religion? I thought I could find some answers in this course.’

Prof. Gupta understood me perfectly well. However, he was what English-speaking people would call an ‘uptight prick’. He asked

Piyush to translate what I had said.

‘That’s a good reason,’ Prof. Pereira said once Piyush was done. ‘But now you are in Delhi. If you pass out of Stephen’s, you will get jobs in big companies. Will you go back to your native place?’ His concern seemed genuine.

It took me a few seconds to understand his question. Piyush offered to translate but I gestured for him not to.

‘I will, sir,’ I finally replied. I didn’t give a reason. I didn’t feel the need to tell them I would go back because my mother was alone there. I didn’t say we were from the royal family of Durnraon. Even though there was nothing royal about us any more, we belonged there. And, of course, I didn’t mention the fact that I couldn’t stand any of the people I had met in this city so far.

‘We’ll ask you something about Bihar then?’ Prof. Fernandez said. ‘Sure.’

‘What’s the population of Bihar?’

‘Ten crores.’

‘Who runs the government in Bihar?’

‘Right now it’s Lalu Prasad’s party.’

‘And which party is that?’

‘RJD - Rashtriya Janata Dal.’

The questions kept coming, and after a while I couldn’t keep track of who was asking what. While I understood their English, I couldn’t answer in complete sentences. Hence, I gave the shortest answers possible. But one question had me stumped.

‘Why is Bihar so backward?’ Prof Gupta said.

I didn’t know the answer, forget saying it in English. Piyush tried to speak on my behalf. ‘Sir, that’s a question nobody can really answer.’ But Prof. Gupta raised a hand. ‘You said your mother runs a rural school. You should know Bihar.’

I kept quiet.

‘It’s okay. Answer in Hindi,’ Prof. Pereira said.

‘Backward compared to what, sir?’ I said in Hindi, looking at Prof.

Gupta.

‘Compared to the rest of India.’

‘India is pretty backward,’ I said. ‘One of the poorest nations in the world.’

‘Sure. But why is Bihar the poorest of the poor?’

‘Bad government,’ Piyush said, almost as a reflex. Prof. Gupta kept his eyes on me.

‘It’s mostly rural, sir,’ I said. ‘People don’t have any exposure to modernity and hold on to backward values. There’s poor education. Nobody invests in my state. The government is in bed with criminals and together they exploit the state and its people.’

Prof Pereira translated my answer for Prof. Gupta. He nodded as he heard it. ‘Your answers are sensible, but your English is terrible,’ he said.

‘Would you rather take a sensible student, or someone who speaks a foreign language well?’

My defiance stumped them all. Prof. Fernandez wiped his glasses as he spoke, turning his head towards me. ‘English is no longer a foreign language, Mr Jha. It’s a global language. I suggest you learn it.’ ‘That’s why I’m here, sir,’ I said.

My answers came from the heart but I didn’t know if they had any effect on the professors. The interview was over. They asked me to leave the room.

*

I stood in the corridor, figuring out where to go next. Piyush came out of the committee room. His lean and fit frame made him look like a student, despite him being much older. He spoke to me in Hindi. ‘Your sports trial is in one hour. See me on the basketball court.’ ‘Sir, is there even a point? That interview went horribly.’

‘You couldn’t learn some English, along with basketball?’ ‘Nobody speaks it in our area.’ I paused and added, ‘Sir.’

He patted my back. ‘Get out of Bihar mode, son. Anyway, sports quota trials are worth 85 per cent. Play well.’

‘I’ll do my best, sir.’

2

If she weren't tall I wouldn't have noticed her. It is funny how her height shaped my life.

If she had been four inches shorter, my eyes may never have met hers and everything would have been different. If I had not been bored and arrived at the basketball court an hour earlier, it would have been different. If someone had not missed a pass and the ball had not come out of the court and hit me on the head, I would have had a different life. Tiny bumps in time shape our lives, even though we spend hours trying to make long-term plans. I had no plan to meet the love of my life on a basketball court. I was there only to kill time and because I had nowhere else to go.

A small crowd of students, mostly men, had gathered around the Stephen's basketball court. Girls' sports trials always garnered an audience—there was no better excuse to check them out. Everyone spoke in English. I didn't speak at all. I straightened my back and stared at the court with a sense of purpose, mainly to come across as if I belonged there. As ten girls came on to the court, the crowd cheered. Five of the girls belonged to the existing college team; the other five had applied for admission under the sports quota.

Piyush came to the centre of the court, ball in hand and whistle in mouth. As he blew it, the girls sprang into action.

Five feet, nine inches is tall for an Indian girl. It is tall even for a girl in a basketball team. Her long neck, long arms and long legs held every guy's attention. She was a part of the sports-quota applicants' team. She wore black fitted shorts and a sleeveless sports vest with 'R' printed in yellow at the back. She collected the ball within seconds. She wore expensive Nike ankle-length sneakers, the kind I had seen NBA players wear on TV. Her diamond earrings twinkled in the sun. She dribbled the ball with her right hand. I noticed she had long, beautiful fingers.

'Ten points for looks, coach,' a senior student called out as R

passed the ball. The crowd tittered. Well, the men did. The wisecrack distracted R for a moment, but she resumed her game as if she was used to such comments.

The sports-quota girls played well individually. However, they didn't play well as a team.

R dribbled the ball and reached the opposition's basket. Three opponents surrounded her. R passed the ball to her teammate, who missed the pass.

'What the...' R screamed. Too late. The rival team took the ball, passed it to the other end and scored a basket.

R cursed herself, inaudible to anyone else. She then signalled to three of her teammates to cover specific opponents and jogged across the court. When she went past me, I saw her sweaty, flushed face from up close. We made eye contact for nanoseconds, perhaps only in my imagination. But in those nanoseconds something happened to my heart.

No, I wouldn't say I fell in love with her. I wouldn't even say I felt attracted to her. But I felt something deep inside, strong enough for my heart to say, *You have to talk to this girl at least once in your life.*

'Babes, cover her. I said cover' R screamed. Her state of mind was as far from mine as possible. She passed the ball to her teammate, who missed scoring a basket again.

'What are you guys doing?' she shouted in perfect English. I felt nervous; how would I ever speak to her? Her face was grimy, dust sticking to her left cheek and forehead. Yet, it was one of the most beautiful faces I had seen in my entire life. Sometimes it is hard to explain why you find a person beautiful. Was it her narrow face, perfectly in line with her slender body? Was it her flawless skin and complexion, which had turned from cream to pink to red? Or was it not about her looks at all? Was it her passion, her being totally immersed in the game? I didn't know.

Of course, I never actually thought it would lead to anything. She seemed too posh to even give me a second glance.

Destiny, however, had other plans. For why else, in the seventh minute of the first half, would the college team captain overthrow the ball outside the court, where it hit my head as I stood on the sidelines? Why would I grab the ball in reflex? More than anything, why would R come to collect it?

‘Ball, please,’ she said, panting. I felt paralysed.

‘I said ball, please,’ she said. I held on to the ball for an extra half second. I wanted to look at her a bit longer. I wanted to take a snapshot of her sweaty face and store it in my mind’s camera for life.

I threw the ball at her. She caught it with ease and looked at me. She could tell from my throw that I knew the game.

‘Change your point shooter,’ I said. For some reason, I had managed to speak in correct English this time.

‘What?’ she said. She surveyed me from top to bottom. I now wished I had worn better clothes. I had not changed out of my interview shirt and pants, both of which the tailor back home had stitched too loose for me. I looked out of place on the basketball court. With my folder of certificates, I resembled a hero from those Hindi films of the seventies—the one who could not find a job. *I have a Bihar state team T-shirt*, I wanted to tell her. Of course, in the middle of a game, and as a first conversation, this was a terrible idea.

‘Your shooter is useless,’ I said.

The referee whistled to commence the game. She turned away and forgot about me faster than her throw reached her team member.

‘Here, pass it to me,’ R shouted as she reached the opposition basket.

Her point shooter held the ball and looked around, confused.

‘I said *here*’ R screamed so loudly that pigeons flew off the trees in the lawns. The point shooter passed the ball, R caught it and took a shot from well beyond the three-point line.

Whoosh! The ball went through the basket. The crowd cheered. They already had a soft spot for R anyway.

The referee announced a break at the ten-minute mark. The college team led 12-5. R huddled with her team, figuring out their strategy for

the next half. As her team meeting ended, she wiped her face and neck with a towel.

I couldn't take my eyes off her. I forgot I had my own trial in less than an hour. I only wanted to figure out a way to talk to her a bit more. Maybe I could tell her she played well. I wondered how to tell her about my state-level game without coming across as a show-off. And, more than anything, how would I go beyond five words of English?

She caught me staring. I wanted to kill myself. She continued to jgnli directly at me, the towel still around her neck. Then she walked up to me. A shiver ran down my spine.

I didn't mean to stare, I wanted to tell her. I wondered if she would scream at me like she had done during the match.

Flunks,' R said.

She had walked across the court, to thank me?

She was breathing hard. My eyes were glued to hers.

Look away, Madhav, I scolded myself and turned away.

'That was a good tip,' she said to my left profile.

'Welcome... You...are...good,' I said. Uttering each word was like hitting a brick.

'Any other suggestions for the second half? We're losing.'

Yes,' I said, turning to face her again. I wanted to give her more up but couldn't in English. 'You speak Hindi?' I said.

She looked baffled. Nobody in St. Stephen's had ever asked anyone that question.

'Well, yeah, of course,' she said.

'Okay,' I said, and explained in my language, 'they have two strong players. Cover them tight. Don't fix formations for your players. Two of yours should move with them. You become the shooter. Of the other two, one is your defence, the other supports you.'

The whistle blew again.

'Got to go,' she said. 'Catch you later.'

I didn't understand what 'catch you' meant. Did it mean she would

catch what I had said later? Did it mean she didn't understand what I had said? Or did she mean she actually wanted to catch me? Like, she liked me so much she wanted to catch me? Of course, this seemed unlikely. But then I had given her good tips and you never know with these modern people. You see, my mind has this overdrive switch, especially when it's excited. It starts to get ahead of itself and thinks useless thoughts when I could actually be doing something constructive, like watching the game or finding out that girl's name.

The game restarted. The referee's whistle, the sound of the players' shoes as they run across the court, the shrieks, the yells and the cries of victory and defeat—few things in life match the excitement of a sports court. Basketball, underrated as it might be in this country, packs it all in half an hour. I cannot understand why Indians don't play this game more. It doesn't take up too much space, doesn't need much equipment and a big group can play it all at once.

'Yes!' she screamed as she scored a basket. The hall went in without touching the ring, making the most beautiful sound in a basketball game—the soft 'chhciaak' when only the net touches the ball. Sweat dripped off her face as she ran back to her side of the court.

The match ended 21-15. The newbies had lost, but still kept pace with the college team—a considerable achievement. R, however, seemed disappointed. She wiped her face with a towel and picked up her blue Nike kitbag. A few boys tried to make eye contact with her but she ignored them, I wanted to speak to her. However, no boy from Dumraon has ever had the guts to approach a high-class girl from Delhi. I wanted her to watch my game. There was nothing else I could impress her with. Coach Piyush went up to her. They became engrossed in a conversation. This was my chance. Underconfident guys need a go-between to speak to a girl. I ran up to Piyush.

'My trial now. I change, sir?' I said to him.

Piyush turned to me, surprised, I don't know whether at my English or my stupid question or both.

'Aise kheliyega? Trial-va hai ya mazaak?' he said in Bhojpuri, not

even Hindi. He meant: will you play like this? Is it a trial or a joke?

I regretted knowing him.

‘I...I...’

Then R interrupted. ‘Oh, you are also sports quota?’

Piyush looked at both of us, surprised at the familiarity.

‘Yes,’ I said, one of the few English responses I could give with confidence.

‘State-level player. Watch this Bihari’s game and go,’ Piyush said and guffawed before he left.

I could have taken offence. He had used the word ‘Bihari’ as if to say ‘Watch, even this poor little Bihari can play’, despite being a Bihari himself. However, he had helped me without knowing it, so I was grateful. She looked at me and smiled.

‘No wonder you gave those tips.’ she said. ‘State level, my God,’

‘What is your good name?’ I blurted out, without any context or sense of timing. Also, who on earth says ‘good name’ these days? Only losers like me who translate ‘shubh naarn’ in Hindi to English.

‘Good or bad, only one name. Riya,’ she said and smiled.

Riya. I loved her short little name. Or maybe when you start liking people, you start liking everything about them—from their sweaty eyebrows to their little names.

‘Your name?’ she said. For the first time in my life a girl had asked my name.

‘Myself Madhav Jha.’

That was my reflexive response. It was only later that I learnt that people who construct sentences like that sound low class. You see, we think in Hindi first and simply translate our thoughts, word for word.

‘From Bihar,’ she said and laughed. ‘Right?’

She didn’t laugh because I was a Bihari. She laughed because Piyush had already revealed that fact about me. There was no judgement in her voice. I liked her more and more every second.

‘Yes. You?’

‘From Delhi itself.’

I wanted to continue talking to her. I wanted to know her full name and her native place. That is how we introduce ourselves in Dumraon. However, I didn't know how to ask her in English, the language one needed to impress girls. Plus, I had a selection trial in a few minutes.

The coach blew his whistle.

'I have my trials now, will you watch?' I said.

'Okay,' she said.

I ran—rather, hopped—in excitement towards the changing room. Soon, I was back on court and Piyush started the game.

I played well. I don't want to brag but I played better than any player on the college team.

'Basket,' I shouted as I scored my fifth shot. As the crowd dapped, I looked around. She was sitting on one of the benches, sipping water from a bottle. She clapped too.

I had a good game, but her presence made me play even better.

The score inched forward; I pushed myself harder and scored a few more baskets. When I took a tough shot, the seniors patted my back. Piyush blew the final whistle. Final score: 25-28. We had done it. The newbies had managed to defeat die St. Stephen's team.

My body was drenched in sweat. I felt drained and exhausted. Players patted my back as I struggled to catch my breath. Piyush came running up to me in the middle of the court.

'You scored 17 out of 28. Well done, Bihari,' he said. He ruffled my sweaty hair. I walked out of the court deliberately towards Riya.

'Wow, you really are good,' she said.

'Thanks,' I said, still panting after the game.

'Anyway, I have to go,' she said and extended her hand. 'Nice meeting you. Bye.'

'Bye,' I said, my heart sinking. My head had known it would end like this. My heart didn't want it to end.

'Unless we are both lucky,' she added and grinned. 'And the higher powers here admit us.'

'Who knows,' I said.

‘Yeah. But if they do, then see you. Else, bye.’

She walked away. I realized I didn’t even know her full name. As she became more distant with every step, I wanted nothing more than to get admission to St. Stephen’s. ’

I walked up to Piyush.

‘You cracked it. On fire on the court, huh?’ he said.

‘Sir, but the interview... My English—’

‘Sucked,’ he said.

Disappointment slammed into me. His expression suggested ‘sucked’ meant something nasty.

‘But you play bloody good basketball,’ Piyush continued. He patted my back and walked away.

I stood alone in the middle of the basketball court. Everyone else had left. I saw the brick-coloured buildings and the greenery around me.

Is this place in my destiny? I wondered. Well, it wasn’t just about my destiny. It was our destiny.

That is why, one month later, a postman came to my doorstep in Dumraon with a letter from St. Stephen’s College. He also wanted a big tip.

3

'Hey,' she said. Her perky voice startled me; I had been scanning the college noticeboard.

I turned around. I had prayed for this to happen. She and I had both made it.

She wore black, skin-tight jeans and a black-and-white striped shirt. Without the sweat and grime from court, her face glowed. She had translucent pink lip gloss on, with tiny glittery bits on her lips. Her hair, slightly wavy, came all the way down to her waist. Her long fingers looked delicate, hiding the power they had displayed on court. My heart was in my mouth. Ever since I had got my admission letter, I had been waiting for the month before college opened to pass quickly and to find out if Riya had made it too.

'Riya,' she said. 'You remember, right?'

Did I remember? I wanted to tell her I had not forgotten her for one moment since I left Delhi. I wanted to tell her I had never seen a girl more beautiful than her. I wanted to tell her that the oxygen flow to my lungs had stopped.

'Of course,' I said. 'Glad you joined.'

'I wasn't sure, actually,' she said and pointed to the noticeboard. 'Is that the first-year timetable?'

I nodded. She smiled at me again.

'What's your course?' she asked, her eyes on the noticeboard.

'Sociology,' I said.

'Oh, intellectual,' she said.

I didn't know what that meant. However, she laughed and I guessed it was something funny, so I laughed along. The noticeboard also had a bunch of stapled sheets with the names of all first-year students and their new roll numbers.

'What about you?' I said. I adjusted my yellow T-shirt and blue jeans while she looked at the board. I had bought new clothes from Patna for St. Stephen's. I didn't look like a government office clerk

anymore. I wanted to fit into my new college.

‘English,’ she said. ‘Here, see, that’s my name.’ Riya Somani, English (Hons), it said. My heart sank. A girl doing an English degree would never befriend a country bumpkin like me.

Her phone rang. She took out the sleek Nokia instrument from her jeans’ pocket.

‘Hi, Mom,’ she said in Hindi. ‘Yes, I reached. Yes, all good, just finding my way.’

Her Hindi was music to my ears. So I could talk to her. She spoke for a minute more and hung up to find me looking at her.

‘Moms, you know,’ she said.

‘Yes. You speak Hindi?’

She laughed. ‘You keep asking me that. Of course I do. Why?’

‘My English isn’t good,’ I said, and switched languages. ‘Can I talk to you in Hindi?’

‘What you say matters, not the language,’ she said and smiled.

Some say there is an exact moment when you fall in love. I didn’t know if it was true before, but I do now. This was it. When Riya Somani said that line, the world turned in slow motion. I noticed her delicate eyebrows. When she spoke, they moved slightly. They had the perfect length, thickness and width. She would win a ‘best eyebrows’ competition hands down—or as we say in basketball, it would be a slam dunk.

Perhaps I should have waited to fall in love with her. However, I knew it was pointless. I had little control over my feelings. So from my first day in college, I was in love. Riya Somani, ace basketball player, English literature student, most beautiful girl on the planet, owner of extraordinary eyebrows and speaker of wonderful lines, had yanked my heart out of its hiding place.

Of course, I could not show it. I didn’t have the courage, nor would it be a smart idea.

We walked down a corridor towards our respective classrooms. I had her with me for two more minutes.

‘You made friends here?’ she said.

‘Not really,’ I said. ‘You?’

‘I have some classmates from school in Stephen’s. Plus, I am from Delhi, so have many friends outside.’

‘I hope I can adjust,’ I said. ‘I feel I don’t belong here.’

‘Trust me, nobody feels they do,’ she said. ‘Which residence did they give you?’

‘Rudra,’ I said. ‘How about you?’

‘They don’t give one to Delhiites. I’m a day-ski, unfortunately,’ she said, using the common term for day scholars.

We reached my classroom. I pretended not to see it and kept walking until she reached hers.

‘Oh, this is my class,’ she said. ‘Where’s yours?’

‘I’ll find out, go ahead,’ I said.

She smiled and waved goodbye. I wanted to ask her out for coffee, but couldn’t. I could shoot a basket from half-court three times in a row but I could not ask a girl to come to the college cafeteria with me.

‘Basketball,’ I blurted out.

‘What?’

‘Want to play sometime?’ I recovered quickly.

‘With you? You’ll kick my ass,’ she said and laughed. I didn’t know why she felt I would kick her rear end or why she found the phrase funny. I joined her in the laughter anyway.

‘You play well,’ I said as we stood at her classroom door.

‘Okay, maybe after a few days, once we settle into classes,’ she said. She walked in for her first English lecture. The joy at the possibility of meeting her again made me forget I had a class. I wanted to dance in the garden.

The bell for the first period rang. ‘This isn’t sociology, right?’ I asked a clueless English student as he arrived late for his own class.



‘You are good. Really good,’ she said as she wiped her face with a towel.

We had played a half-court game; I defeated her 20-9.

'I'm hopeless,' she said. She took a sip from her water bottle. She wore a fitted sleeveless white top and purple shorts.

'You're fine. Just out of practice,' I said.

She finished the water and shook the empty bottle. 'I'm still thirsty,' she said.

'Cafe?' I said.

She looked at me, somewhat surprised. I kept a straight face.

'You get good juice there,' I said in an innocent tone.



A swarm of students buzzed inside the cafeteria. Given that it was lunch hour, it took us five minutes to get a table. They didn't have juice, so Riya settled for lemonade. I ordered a mince and cold coffee. I realized both of us had a problem initiating conversation. I couldn't talk because I didn't have the confidence. She, given a choice, preferred to be quiet. Silent Riya, I wanted to call her. I had to break this deadlock if I wanted this to go anywhere. The waiter brought us our food.

'In Bihar, we have aloo chop, in which we sometimes stuff keema. This mince is the same,' I said.

'What's Bihar like? I've never been there,' she said and pursed her lips around the straw to sip her lemonade.

'Not like Delhi. Simple. Lots of rice fields. Peaceful, apart from cities like Patna.'

'I like peaceful places,' she said.

'There are problems, too. People aren't educated. There's violence. I am sure you've heard. Poor and backward state, as people say.'

'You can be rich and backward, too.'

We had an awkward silence for two minutes. Silent Riya and Scared Madhav.

Break the deadlock, I told myself.

'So you live with your family in Delhi?'

'Yes. A big one. Parents, uncles, cousins and a brother.'

‘What do your parents do?’ I said.

A boy should make more interesting conversation with a girl. But a loser like me had little experience or finesse in this regard.

‘Family business. Real estate and infrastructure.’

‘You are rich, right?’ I said. Idiot Madhav. Couldn’t think of anything better.

She laughed at my direct question. ‘Rich in money, or rich in mind? Two different things.’

‘Huh? Rich, like wealthy?’

‘Unfortunately, yes.’

‘What’s unfortunate? Everyone wants to be rich.’

‘Yeah, I guess. It just embarrasses me. Plus, all the obsession with money and how it defines you, I just don’t get it.’

I realized she and I came from different worlds. Perhaps it was a futile battle to pursue her. Logically, practically and rationally, it made no sense.

‘Can I try your mince?’ she said. ‘I’m hungry.’

I nodded. I asked the waiter to get another fork. However, before he could get one she picked up mine and took a bite.

She took my fork, does it mean anything?

‘Where’s home for you?’ she said.

1 himraon. A small town, three hours from Patna.’

‘Nice,’ she said.

You will probably find it boring.’

‘No, no, tell me more. As you can see, I’m not much of a talker. I like to listen,’ she said. She seemed genuinely interested. I told her about my life back home, revolving around my mother, her school and basketball. There wasn’t much else. My father had passed away ten years ago. He had left us a huge, crumbling haveli, a couple of fields and many legal cases related to property. We had some servants, who stayed in the haveli’s servant quarters more out of loyalty than their paltry salaries.

My ancestors were landlords and from the royal family of I

iuinraon, the oldest princely state in British India. When India became independent, the government took away our family estate and left us with an annual pension that declined with every generation. My great-grand-uncles squandered their money, especially since they all felt they could gamble better than anyone else in the world. Several near-bankruptcies later, the women of the house took charge as the men had all turned into alcoholics. Somehow, the women saved the family pride and the haveli. All of my cousins had moved abroad, and vowed never to return. My father, the only one to remain in Bihar, held the last title of Raja Sahib of Dumraon. Ten years ago, he had succumbed to a cardiac arrest. My mother, Rani Sahiba Durga Jha, was the only strong-willed person left in the family. She brought me up and maintained the few farms left. She also ran the Dumraon Royal School, which taught seven hundred kids from nearby villages. The noise of air bubbles as Riya sucked up the last of her lemonade made me realise I had spoken non-stop for ten minutes.

'I'm boring you,' I said, I vowed to stay quiet for a few minutes, It had to be Riya's turn now, 'Not at all,'

I smiled, 'Now you speak, If you let me talk, I won't stop,'

'Okay, but wait, technically you're a prince, aren't you? Or are you the king, Raja Sahib?'

I laughed, 'There are no kings and princes anymore, Only uneducated villagers talk like that,'

'But they do, right? Seriously, am I talking to a prince? Do they address you as Prince?' She widened her eyes, Her award-winning eyebrows moved up and down a little, 'Sometimes they do, Listen, it's not important, We're not rich or anything,*

'You live in a palace?'

'Haveli, It's like, well, a small palace, Anyway, I'm no prince, I'm a Bihari boy trying to graduate, Do I look like a prince from any angle?'

'C'mon, you are tall and handsome, You could be one, if you had some jewellery,' she said, She had said it in jest, but it was the first real compliment she had paid me. Little cupcakes of happiness exploded

inside me, 'Did I, a commoner, just play basketball with the Raja Sahib of Dumraon?' she said and burst into laughter, 'I shouldn't have told you,' I shook my head, 'C'mon,' she said and tapped my wrist, My arm went all warm and tingty, 'What about you? Which eighteen-year old girl comes to college in a BMW and calls herself a commoner?'

'Oh, you noticed. That's my dad's ear,*

'You must be so rich.'

'My family is. Not me,'

As she spoke, three girls arrived at our table, "We've been looking for you everywhere," one of them said.

'Hey, girls' Riya said. 'Come, sit with us. Madhav. meet Garima, Ayesha and Rachita, friends from my class, Girls, this is Madhav, my basketball friend'

I realised my place in her life. *Basketball Friend*. Perhaps she had friends for specific purposes.

The girls looked me up and down, down and up, checking me out. 'Not, bad, Riya,' Garima said and winked at her. The girls burst out laughing and sat down with us.

'Are you In the college team?' Rachita asked me. She wore a red-and-black bandana on her head.

I nodded, nervous at their bold familiarity.

'Madhav has played state level,' Riya said and looked at me proudly.

'Wow,' the girls said in unison,

'Would you like to order anything?' I said,

The three girls froze and then began to laugh. It dawned on me that they were laughing at me. My English had sounded like this: 'Vood you laik to aarder anything?' I didn't know this was such a cardinal sin.

'What happened?' I said,

'Not a thing,' Garima said and stood up, 'Thanks, Madhav, we just ate lunch, Hey, Riya, let's catch up later, yeah?'

The three girls left. We waved goodbyes,

'What happened, Riya?' I said.

'They're ditzy. Forget them,' she said

'Ditzy?'

'Silly and stupid, Anyway, I better leave too. My driver should be here.'

We walked out of the cafeteria to the main gate. Her dark blue BMW waited outside, 'So I'm your basketball friend?' I said as we reached the car, 'Well, that, and my lemonade-and-mince friend,'

'How about tea friend?'

'Sure,' She stepped inside the car and sat down. She rolled down the window to say goodbye.

'Or a movie friend?'

'Hmm,'

'What?'

'Need to think about it.'

'Think about what?'

'Will the royal highness condemn me to death if I say no?'

I laughed. 'I might.'

'See you later, Prince,' she said. The car drove off. '

I didn't know if I was a real prince or not, but I had found my princess.

Three months later

'Did you just put your hand on mine?' she whispered, but loud enough for people around us in the movie theatre to look our way.

'Accidentally,' I said.

'Learning big English words, are we?' she said.

'I'm trying.'

'Mr Madhav Jha, you have come to see a movie. Focus on that.'

'I'm trying,' I said again. I turned my attention back to Shah Rukh Khan. He had rejoined college and was singing 'Main hoon na' to anyone in need of reassurance.

We had come to the Odeon Cinema in Connaught Place. Riya had finally agreed to see a movie with me. She had lost a basketball bet - she had challenged me to score a basket from half-court in one try.

'Now that will be a super shot,' she had said.

'What do I get? A movie treat?'

'You can't do it.'

I had given it a try and failed the first week. Half-court shots are tough. I couldn't do it in the next two weeks either.

'See, even destiny doesn't want us to go out,' she had said.

In the fourth week, I put in all the focus I had and made my shot. The ball hit the ring, circled around it twice and fell into the basket.

'Yes,' I screamed.

Even though she had lost the bet, she clapped.

'So, do I get a date?' I said.

'It's not a date. We just go for a movie. Like friends.'

'Isn't that what high-class people call a date?'

'No.'

'What's a date then?'

'You want to see the movie with me or not?' she had said, her hands on her hips.

The hands-on-hips pose meant no further questions. In the three months I had known her, I knew she hated being pushed. I thought maybe that was how rich people were—somewhat private. We overdid the familiarity in our villages anyway.

Now, as Shah Rukh Khan continued his song, I wondered what I meant to her. We met in college every day, and ended up having tea at least three times a week. I did most of the talking. I would tell her stories from the residences, or ‘rez’, as the students called them—the fancy word for hostels in Stephen’s. I was in Rudra-North, and told her tales of messy rooms, late-night carrom matches and the respect we needed to show seniors. She listened intently, even smiled sometimes. When I asked her about her home, she didn’t say much. Back in Dumraon it is unthinkable for friends to not share every detail about themselves. High-class people have this concept called space, which means you cannot ask them questions or give them opinions about certain aspects of their life.

Am I special to her? I kept asking myself. Sometimes I saw her chatting with other guys and felt insanely jealous. My insistence on seeing a movie together was to find out what Riya Somani really thought of Madhav Jha. I had held her hand to figure out where I stood. Given her reaction, nowhere.

In fact, she removed her arm from the armrest for the rest of the movie. She seemed upset, even though she never said a word. She kept watching the film.

*

‘Is everything okay?’ I said. She sipped her drink in silence. We had walked from Odeon to Keventers, famous for its milkshakes sold in glass bottles.

‘Uh huh,’ she said, indicating a yes. I hated this response of hers.

We had finished two-thirds of our milkshakes without talking to each other. She looked straight ahead, lost in thought. I felt she would cry if poked.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘What?’ she said, surprised.

‘About placing my hand on yours,’ I said. I didn’t want my stupid move to backfire.

‘When?’

‘During the movie. You know, I...’

‘I don’t even remember that,’ she said, interrupting me.

‘Oh,’ I said, and felt a wave of relief run through me. ‘Then why do you look upset?’

‘Never mind,’ she said. Silent Riya’s typical response. She brushed aside strands of hair from her face.

‘Why don’t you ever tell me anything?’ I said, my voice a mixture of plea and protest.

She finished her milkshake and placed the empty bottle on a table. ‘Ready to go?’ she said instead.

‘Riya, we never talk about you. Am I only good enough to play basketball with?’

‘What?’

‘We meet, play, eat and talk. But you never share anything important with me.’

‘I don’t share much about my life with anyone, Madhav.’

‘Am I just anyone?’

A waiter arrived to collect the empty bottles. She spoke only after he left. ‘You are a friend.’

‘So?’

‘So what? I have many friends. I don’t share stuff with them.’

‘Am I just like every other friend of yours? Is there nothing special about me?’

She smiled. ‘Well, you do play basketball better than anyone else.’

I stood up. I didn’t find her funny.

‘Hey, wait.’ Riya pulled me down again.

I sat down with a stern expression.

‘Why do you want to know about my life?’ she said.

‘It matters to me. Unlike your other friends, I can tell if something

is bothering you. And, if something is bothering you, it bothers me. I want to know things about you, okay? But getting you to talk is like a dentist pulling teeth.'

She laughed and interrupted my rant.

'I have a fucked-up family. What do you want to know?' she said.

I looked at her, puzzled and astonished at her choice of words.

More than anything, I could not associate any family with a BMW to be fucked up.

Her eyes met mine, perhaps for a final check to see if I deserved her trust. 'Let's go for a walk,' she said.

*

Her plush car dropped us off at India Gate. The soft evening sun cast long shadows of the monument and of us on the red sandstone pavement. We walked the mile-long distance all the way up to Rashtrapati Bhavan. On these roads, far away from Bihar, India did not come across as a poor country. Pigeons flocked the sky and government babus from nearby offices scurried about, both trying to reach home before it got dark.

We walked together. At least our shadows appeared to hold hands.

'I don't open up to people. At most I keep a journal, and even that is rare. You know I'm a quiet person,' Riya said.

'I understand.'

'Thanks. The problem is my family. They're obsessed with money. I'm not.'

'That's a good thing, right?'

'I don't know. Also, I don't matter. My brothers do, because they will take over the business one day. I'm supposed to shut up, get married and leave. The high point of my life is to have kids and shop.'

'And that's not what you want to do?'

'No!' she almost shouted. 'You know me better than that. Don't you?'

'Sorry.'

'Sucks being a girl in this country, I tell you. Sucks.'

‘You seem upset. Did something happen today?’

‘I told them I want to study music after college. They want me to marry into some rich Marwari family and live like a queen. I don’t want to live like a queen. That is not what I dream of.’

‘Trust me, kings and queens are overrated,’ I said.

She remained silent.

‘What do you want, Riya? Do you have a dream?’

‘Well, dreams suck. You get attached to them and they don’t come true.’

‘Sometimes they do.’

‘Not in my case.’

‘What is your dream?’ I asked again.

She looked at me. ‘You’ll laugh.’

‘Try me.’

Site smiled. ‘Okay, so, I have this dream. I want to play music and sing...in a bar in New York.’

‘Wow.’

‘What? You think it’s stupid, right?’

No. That’s quite specific. Singing in a bar in New York.’

‘Yes. That’s it. I don’t want to be a famous singer or a rock star. I don’t want to marry a billionaire. I just want to sing in peace, surrounded by passionate people. I want to own a house in Manhattan, *my* house, filled with books and music CDs. I want to play basketball on weekends. I don’t want to check out a dozen lehengas for my engagement.’

‘Sounds like you have it all figured out.’

‘Not really. Maybe it’s just an escapist fantasy. But I have had it since I was twelve. We had gone to New York. The city blew me away. I saw people who loved what they did. They weren’t rich, but happy. And there was this lady in a bar.. .she sang from her heart, unaware of everything around her.’

The sun was setting, and the sky turned from orange to dark grey. We had now reached the point near Rashtrapati Bhavan where Delhi

Police guards tell you to stop and turn around. She continued to tell me about her New York trip.

‘In fact, I took up basketball because I saw an NBA game live at Madison Square Garden in New York.’

‘You’ve seen an NBA game live?’ I said.

‘Yeah. The atmosphere.. it’s electric. You should see one sometime, Madhav.’

I shrugged. ‘Anyway, I like your dream, Riya,’ I said. ‘It’s doable, not unreal.’

‘Unreal, like?’ she said.

‘Like becoming a top actress or the prime minister. You just want something simple.’

She smiled. ‘Nothing is simple for a girl in a family like mine,’ she said.

We walked in silence for a few minutes.

‘I feel better,’ she said after a while. ‘

‘What?’

She looked at me. The last of the daylight tinted her face orange, making her look ethereal. I wanted to give her a hug.

‘I feel better after talking to you. Thanks,’ she smiled.

The sun vanished and the road became dark. Her skin glowed in the amber lights of Rajpath, I took a chance and held her hand.

‘Another accident?’ she said, but did not pull her hand away.

We laughed together. She spoke again. ‘Even my uncles are the same. Everyone sides with my parents.’

She continued to talk and I continued to listen, even though my entire attention was on how lovely her hand felt in mine.

5

Alter our movie date, we started to spend even more time together. During lunch break, we would sit on the college lawns and eat home-cooked food from her house. She brought an elaborate Marwari thali in a three-tiered tiffin box.

‘How’s the food in the rez?’ she said.

‘Not as good as the Somani Cafe,’ I said.

We sat facing the red-brick college building. The winter sun warmed us as well as her cold tiffin box. I ate three of her four chapatis, and most of the paalak-daal along with it. She never touched the sweet churma. I ate it with a plastic spoon.

‘How’s your room?’ she said.

‘Like any other rez room. Basic. Books, Basketballs and bed linen.’

‘Do you keep it clean?’

I shook my head and grinned.

‘What? You don’t clean it regularly?’

‘Once a week.’

‘Awful.’

‘I don’t have six servants like you do, Miss Riya.’

‘I want to see your room.’

‘You can’t,’ I said. ‘Girls are not allowed.’

‘I know. Just kidding,’ she laughed.

‘Hows your family?’ I said.

‘Same. My brothers, male cousins and uncles are busy planning how to increase their wealth. The women are gushing over their last shopping trip or figuring out which marriage to attend next.’

‘Good, everything is normal then,’ I said.

‘I bought a guitar,’ she said.

‘Nice.’

‘Yeah, I barely talk to anyone at home. Me and my guitar, we’re happy.’

‘You talk to me,’ I said.

‘Even though you eat all my lunch,’ she said and smacked the side of my head.

‘Do you like me?’ I said. She had heard this too many times.

‘Not again, Madhav, please.’

She lay down on the grass. She wore a white-and-maroon salwar-kameez and a black cashmere cardigan, which she had removed and placed on the grass next to her.

She scrunched her eyes to avoid the sun. I shifted and sat in front of her, so my shadow would cover her face.

‘Ah, that’s nice. Tall shady tree, thank you.’

‘People in college talk about us. How we are always together,’ I said.

‘So? Let them. As long as we know there is nothing between us.’

I tilted my body sideways in protest. The sun was back on her face.

‘What?’ she said and cohered her eyes with her hand. ‘Where did my tree go?’

‘The tree is not feeling appreciated.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Why is there nothing between us?’ I said, my upper body still bent to the side.

‘Should there be? First, can you sit like you were sitting before, so people don’t think you are weird and my delicate skin can be protected from the sun?’

I sat up straight once again.

‘Better,’ she said. ‘I need a pillow. Move forward please, tree.’

She put her head in my lap.

‘Nice. Now, what do you want, pillow-tree?’

I’d had many such arguments with her over the past month. She had become an expert at dodging the issue, always getting away with some nonsense, like now.

‘Give me your cardigan,’ I said.

‘Why? Are you cold? It’s a girl’s sweater, pillow-tree,’ she said and giggled.

I placed the sweater over my head. It hid my face.

‘What?’ she said.

I said nothing.

‘Are you sulking, my tall tree?’ she said.

I didn’t respond. She pulled the sweater towards her so that both our faces came under it.

‘Yes? Sulky man, what’s the issue?’ she said, her face upside-down and huge, given that it was so close to mine.

I did not respond. She blew on my face but I did not react.

‘Everyone here must be finding this so creepy,’ she said, ‘our faces under the sweater.’

‘Nobody cares,’ I said.

‘I thought you said everyone talks about us.’

I let out a grunt of protest. She laughed. I took aim and bent. In a second I managed to place my lips on hers, despite her face being upside-down. Spiderman kisses like that. It isn’t easy. I wouldn’t advise it if you’re kissing someone for the first time.

She sprang up. As she rose, her forehead hit my chin. I bit my tongue.

‘Hey,’ she said, ‘not fair.’

I held my mouth in pain. Her forehead had hurt me badly. Still, the pain paled in comparison to the joy I felt from landing my first kiss.

‘Are you hurt?’ she said.

I made a face.

‘Listen, I’m sorry. But what was that?’ she said.

‘A kiss.’

‘I know. What for?’

‘I felt like it.’

She stood up, collected her tiffin box and walked away. I ran behind her. She ignored me and walked faster.

I held her arm. She stopped and glared at me until I let go. She started to walk away again.

‘I am sorry, okay?’ I said and blocked her way. ‘I thought you like

me.

‘Madhav, please understand, I’m not comfortable with all this,’

‘I really like you, Riya. You mean so much to me. You are the reason I’ve survived in this place.’

‘So appreciate what we have. Don’t spoil it.’

‘What do we have? What am I to you?’

‘If we kiss, we have something; if we don’t, then nothing?’ she said.

I kept quiet.

She looked at me for a few seconds. She shook her head in disappointment, turned and walked off. I saw her reach the main gate and get inside her blue car, Only then did I realise I still held her cardigan in my hand.

*

I didn't know if she would come to play basketball with me after the cardigan incident. To my surprise, she did, all svelte in a new Nike top and white shorts. We played without much conversation. Usually, we would stop to chat every five minutes. Today, she focused on the ball like a soldier does in combat with an enemy/.

‘I am sorry, okay?’ I said, Playing with her wasn't as much fun as before.

‘It's fine,’ she said, ‘Let's not talk about it again,’ I put on a sorry face for the next twenty minutes. Finally, I held my ears and stood in the centre of the court.

It did the trick. She smiled.

‘Sorry, I also overreacted,’ she said, ‘Friends?’ she said.

Ban this word, I tell you. ‘Yes, friends,’ I said.

She came forward to hug me. I gently pushed her away, ‘What are you doing?’ she said.

‘I'm not comfortable with this. Please don't spoil what we have,’ I said, mocking her high-strung tone. I stomped my feet and walked off the court. She followed me.

Ignore girls and they can’t leave you alone. Strange. I didn't look at

her.

She spoke from behind me.

'Okay, I get it. I'm a girl. I'm allowed some drama sometimes.'

'Really?'

'Well, I said sorry, too.'

'Whatever. By the way, your cardigan is still with me at the residence.'

'Oh, please get it to college tomorrow. It's my favourite.'

'You want to come pick it up? You wanted to see my room, right?' I said. She raised an eyebrow.

'Really? But how?'

There's a system, it involves me making the guards happy while you rush inside,'

'You'll sneak me in?' she said, her eyes opening wide. 'You won't be the first girl to come to the residences,'

We walked towards the brick-lined path to Rudra-North. She stopped a few steps before I reached Rudra.

'What if we get caught?' she said.

'I'll be expelled, but they'll spare you. You're a girl and your father will have enough contacts,'

'So?'

'Let's do it,' I said.

I went up to the guard. I followed the code; told him to check out a problem in the bathroom, and slipped him fifty rupees. He had done it for others before so he quickly understood. He saw Riya in the distance.

'Is she from outside or a student?' the guard said.

'What do you care?' I said.

'Just in case there's any trouble later.'

'Will there be trouble?'

'No, Make sure she leaves in thirty minutes. No guarantee with the new guard.'

She entered my room and I slammed the door shut behind us.

My room was furnished with the bare necessities—a bed, a desk, an easy chair and a study chair. The walls were lined with certificates and pictures.

‘So many certificates,’ she said as she scanned them. They began right from the inter-school tournaments I had won in class VIII to the one I had for participation in the national games. (My team from Bihar had come eighth.) ‘And are these photos of your friends?’

‘Those are friends from my old basketball team,’ I said, standing behind her. I stood close enough for her hair to touch me. We had never been alone together before.

‘How about family pictures?’ she said.

I opened my study-table drawer. I took out a photograph of the Dumraon Royal School’s annual day. My mother stood on a stage along with students in red sweaters.

‘Your mom?’ she said, holding the picture.

‘She’s the principal.’

‘You have more pictures?’

‘Not really,’ I said and rifled through the drawers. I found another black-and-white photo, but hid it.

‘What is that?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Show, no.’

‘It’s a childhood picture.’

‘Oh, then I definitely want to see it.’

She charged towards me.

‘No,’ I protested and tried to shut the drawer. She laughed, and tackled me like she did on the basketball court, treating the picture like the ball.

On the court our occasional touches meant little. In the room, her jostling me felt electric. I wanted to grab her tight, but didn’t. I didn’t

want a scene like last time.

I let her have the picture and stepped aside. She looked at it and began to laugh.

'How old are you in this?'

'Four.'

The picture was of my parents and me standing outside the haveli. My mother wore a saree with a ghongat covering half her face. I wore a vest and little else.

Riya sat down on the bed. She examined the photograph like a detective solving a murder mystery. I sat next to her.

Is that your haveli?' she said.

I nodded.

'It's beautiful.'

'That's fifteen years ago. Now it's falling apart.'

She looked closer. A cow was visible in the background. Two kids at under a tree with an old man.

'Who are they?'

'Random people, perhaps some visitors. I told you, people come to us with their problems. For them, we are still the rulers.'

'I'd love to go see it.'

I laughed.

'What?' she said, puzzled.

'You? In Bihar?'

'Yeah, why not?'

I shook my head and laughed again.

'What's so funny, prince?' she said and tickled me.

'Stop it, I'm ticklish,' I said and laughed uncontrollably.

'You think I can't leave my sheltered life, huh?' she said, poking my stomach with her fingers. I grabbed and held her. She realized it only after a few seconds.

'Hey,' she said.

'What?'

'You're holding me.'

‘Good observation.’

I looked straight into her eyes. She did not look away. Even though I had zero experience with girls, I could tell this was a good sign.

‘What?’ she said.

I leaned forward to kiss her. At the last moment she moved her face away and I ended up kissing her cheek.

‘Madhav Jha,’ she said. ‘Behave yourself.’

She said it in a firm voice, though without the anger she had shown that day on the lawn.

‘I am behaving like myself. This is what I want to do.’

‘All you boys are the same,’ she said and slapped my wrist.

‘You’ve experienced all boys?’ I raised my eyebrows.

‘Shut up. Okay listen, before I forget, I have to invite you to a party.’

‘Don’t change the topic.’

‘Don’t stick to one either,’ she said and extracted herself from my grip. She shifted into the study chair.

‘Come here. Near me,’ I said.

‘No, sir. I don’t trust you.’

‘Really? Your best friend?’

‘Who is not behaving like a *friend*,’ she said, emphasizing the last word.

I lay back on the bed in a sulk, dangling my legs. I picked up basketball from the bookshelf and spun it on my little finger.

‘I said I want to invite you to a party. Are you paying attention?’ she said.

‘Why do you want attention from someone you don’t trust?’

‘Next Saturday, my house. At 100, Aurangzeb Road,’ she said palms resting on her lap.

I sat up on the bed.

‘Your house?’ I said.

‘Yes, the party is at my place.’

‘You’re making me meet the parents?’

'Yeah, why? There are going to be loads of people there. It's a party'

'Oh, what is the occasion?' I said, back to spinning the ball of my pinkie.

'My birthday party.'

'Your birthday is next month. 1 November. See? I remember.'

'Dad wants me to celebrate it next week. We have family friends in town.'

I nodded and continued to look at the ball. With one swoop of her arm she took the ball away from me.

'Hey!' I protested.

'Is that a yes?'

'Do I have a choice?'

She threw the ball at me. It missed my face and hit my neck.

'You're making it sound like a punishment. It's a party invitation,' she said 'I'll come on one condition.'

'What?'

'Come sit next to me.'

I patted the bed. She rolled her eyes, stood up and came to sit down next to me.

'Why don't you let me hold you?' I said and took her in my arms
'Well, you are now.'

'You don't like it?'

'Madhav...' Her policewoman voice was back.

'What is so wrong with it?'

'I have issues with this stuff. I do.'

'Issues? You know what? Forget it.'

'See, you don't want to listen. Anyway, I am not ready for it.'

'Ready for what?'

She shook her head. I brought my face close to hers. She looked at me.

'There you go again. What is it? A compulsion, huh?' she said. I kept quiet. Her light brown eyes continued to stare me down.

'No woman has ever meant more to me than you.'

She laughed.

'What?'

'That could mean two things. I am really special, or there's not been much choice.'

I couldn't answer. I bent forward and gave her a light peck on her lips. She didn't protest, but didn't join in either. Her lips felt soft and warm. I gave her another peck.

She placed her hand on my chest and pushed me back.

'What?' I said.

'I better leave,' she said and stood up.

'Riya, we kissed,' I said, excited.

She looked at me, her brown eyes a deeper brown than usual. 'You really don't get girls, do you?'

'What?'

'Broadcasting it, like a kid who's found a candy jar.'

'Sort of. Even better than candy though.'

'Nice to know you find me better than a lollipop.'

I laughed.

'Are we dating?' I said.

She grabbed my collar.

'Madhav Jha. Learn about girls, or figure it out. But don't ruin it. Understand?' she said.

I didn't understand at all.

'I do.' I said.

'Bye. Now see me out.'

We tiptoed out of my room and walked to the Rudra exit. We saluted a thank-you to the guard and left.

I had always considered my selection to the Bihar state team as the happiest day of my life. After kissing Riya, the selection day became the second happiest.

'A girl in the hostel?' Ashu slapped my back. 'What a stud.' My hostel mates had come to my room. Fat Ashu sat on my bed, making it creak like crazy. His back slap still hurt.

Ashu, Raman and Shailesh had become my core gang in Rudra. Riya couldn't be with me all the time, and when she couldn't, I hung out with these guys.

'How did you find out?' I said.

'I can still smell the perfume,' Raman said and sniffed like a cartoon character. Everyone laughed.

All four of us came from Bihar or Jharkhand, and none of us were the 'classy' types you find in Stephen's. For instance, nobody in Stephen's would say they watched Bhojpuri movies. We loved them. We liked Hindi music, from Mohammed Rafi in the sixties to Pritam in the here and now. We didn't understand English music beyond one song by Michael Jackson—'Beat it'. Of course, we never admitted all this to the rest of our classmates. We nodded our heads every time someone mentioned a great English movie or brought a rock CD to class. 'Yeah, yeah, cool,' we said.

'Nonsense. Riya and I came straight from the basketball court. No perfume,' I said.

'Even a girl's sweat smells like perfume,' Shailesh said. I threw the basketball at his head. His rectangular-framed glasses flew to the floor. He screamed and held his head in pain.

'You're trying to kill me or what?' he said. I placed Shailesh's spectacles back on his nose.

'Stop talking like that about Riya,' I said.

'Oh my, protective and all,' Shailesh said.

Among the four of us, Shailesh's English was the best. Of course, he preferred Hindi like the rest of us but he could pass off as a 'real' Stephanian when he spoke in English.

'So, are you guys in a relationship? Things seem to be escalating,'

Shailesh said.

'What?' I said.

Ashu laughed.

'He's fucking with you,' Raman said. He had just learnt the F-word. He liked using it. A lot.

'Did anything happen?' Ashu said.

I shrugged.

'What?' Ashu said. 'Dude, did you just do it with the BMW 5-series Riya Somani?'

'Nothing much happened,' I said. 'And stop it, all of you.'

'Is she your girlfriend?' Shailesh said. 'Half the college talks about you guys.'

'I don't know,' I said.

'You don't know?' Ashu said.

'She's not sure.'

'And you?'

I kept quiet.

'You love her?' Ashu said.

I smiled at Ashu. He had asked me the most stupid question.

Did I love her? Did the earth go around the sun? Did night follow day?

'Gone, you are so gone. I can see it on your face,' Ashu said, patted the bed, inviting the others to join him.

My single bed groaned as three boys lay down on it. They stared at the ceiling. As self-styled relationship experts, they offered advice.

'Be careful,' Raman said, 'of this kind of girl.'

'What the...' I said, irritated. 'What kind of girl? And remove your shoes from my bed.'

I sat on the study table and snatched up the basketball again.

'Rich ones. They need toys for time pass. Don't be a toy,' Raman said.

'Toy? I'm her best friend. Besides, she's different. Not money-minded,' I said.

‘You know who her father is?’ Shailesh said, adjusting his glass.

‘Some big-shot Marwari businessman?’ I said.

‘Somani Infrastructure. Your lady’s dad and his brother have a five-hundred-crore business,’ Shailesh said.

Ashu and Raman whistled.

‘Five hundred crore!’ Raman said. ‘Why is she here? Why does she need to study at all?’

I threw a cushion at Raman.

‘Shown what a backward Jharkhandi you are? You remind me of villagers back home. People could study for other reasons, no?’

‘What reasons?’ Ashu said, craning his neck towards me.

‘She’s figuring herself out. Her dreams, passions, desires...’

‘Does she know your desires? Her best friend who wants to do her on his creaky hostel bed.’

Ashu started to move side to side to make the bed creak more.

Everyone laughed.

‘Shut up, bastards,’ I said.

I needed real advice to make sense of what was happening in my life.

‘She’s invited me home for her birthday party.’

The three sat up straight.

‘Can we come along?’ Ashu said.

‘No’

‘You’re useless,’ Raman said.

‘The point is, should I go?’ I said.

‘What?’ Raman said. ‘Of course you should. Where does she stay?’

‘Aurangzeb Road. Where is it?’

‘One of the richest areas. In Lutyens’ Delhi.’

‘See? That’s why I am not sure if I should go.’

‘Why not?’

‘She’ll have her clan there. Everyone is going to see me.’

‘And you’re afraid of that?’ Ashu laughed. ‘I would be, if I were you.’

‘Shut up, fatso,’ Shailesh said. ‘Listen, you have to go. If you want to get close to this girl, you have to meet these people one day anyway.’

‘They will judge me. I can’t dress or talk like them.’

‘What nonsense. Just wear a nice white shirt. Borrow mine,’ Shailesh said.

I kept quiet.

‘Better get it over and done with,’ Raman said after a pause.

‘What do you mean?’ I said.

‘Boss, her rich and classy Marwari family is never going to approve of a villager. You, me and the rest of us here know that,’ Raman said.

‘The boy is a state-level basketball player and studies at St. Stephen’s College. Isn’t that something?’ Shailesh said.

Raman smirked.

‘Still a Bihari farm boy, no?’ he said.

I trembled. The image of rich judgemental parents in a giant bungalow flashed across my mind.

‘You’re killing his confidence,’ Ashu said. ‘Damn, he loves her, okay?’

‘So?’ Raman said.

‘She came to his room, no?’ Ashu said. ‘Madhav, boss, she came to your room right? Knowing you’re a Bihari?’

‘She wants to visit Bihar,’ I said.

‘There you go.’ Ashu said.

Raman rolled his eyes.

‘Go to the party. At least you’ll get free food,’ Ashu said and ‘patted’ my back again. Fatso hits so hard, it hurts for days.

I took two buses to get to Aurangzeb Road. I couldn't find any regular houses there, only massive mansions. Each building looked like an institution, not someone's private home.

'100, Aurangzeb Road.' I saw the sign etched in gold on a black granite plaque. Concealed yellow lights lit up a nameplate, which merely stated 'Somani'. I had borrowed Shailesh's blazer and shirt. I adjusted my clothes.

Evenings in October had started to turn chilly. I approached the guard.

'What's your name?' the guard said in a Bihari accent. He held an intercom phone in his right hand.

'Madhav, Madhav Jha. I am Riya's friend.'

The guard eyed me up and down. He spoke into the intercom.

'Riya madam's friend. Shall I send him in?'

The guard paused. He looked at me.

'What?' I said.

'Wait. They will respond and approve.'

'Isn't there a party?'

'Yes, in the back garden. The maid has gone to check.'

In college I underwent no layers of security to meet Riya. I felt awkward standing and waiting so I made conversation with the guard.

'Are you from Bihar?' I said.

'Yes, from Munger. You?'

'Dumraon.'

'And you are Riya madam's friend?' he said. I heard the condescension in his voice. A low-class can smell another low-class.

'Same college,' I said. The guard gave me an approving nod. He could now understand how Riya could be friends with me.

The intercom rang.

'Go,' the guard said to me, as if he had received clearance from air traffic control.

I stepped inside. A maid gestured for me to follow her. Five expensive cars—an Audi SUV, two Mercedes Benz, one Bentley and Riya's BMW—were parked in the compound.

I entered the house, and found myself in a large living room with a shiny white marble floor. Glittering chandeliers hung from the fifteen-foot high ceiling. Three sofa sets, upholstered in expensive silk, were arranged in a U-shaped configuration. A teak and glass coffee table occupied the middle of the room. This is what a real palace would look like if royals actually had any money. I thought of my haveli, with its peeling walls and cracked floors. Forget chandeliers, we felt lucky if we had less than five-hour power cuts.

Suddenly, in this lap of luxury, I felt lonely. I missed home, my hostel room and my mother, all at the same time. It is funny how class works. The moment you are placed in a higher one, a part of you feels terrified and alone.

‘Come this way,’ the maid said as she saw me stand still.

We reached the back garden. Loud music and a waft of cool breeze greeted me. I saw the manicured, basketball-court-sized garden lit up with small fairy lights. White-gloved servers manned a buffet and bar counter. In the right corner, water shimmered in a small swimming pool. Most of the eighty-odd guests had gathered around the pool. Everyone was dressed as if they had just participated in a fashion show.

People chatted in small groups. Everyone seemed extremely happy.

I looked around for the tall girl who had invited me. However, this party had several tall girls, a lot of them on account of their three-inch heels.

‘Hey, Madhav!’ I heard her voice.

I squinted to find Riya waving at me from a distance. She walked towards me. She wore a wine-coloured dress which ended six inches above her knees. She had applied light make-up. Her face looked even prettier than it did every day. She wore dangling diamond-and-white gold earrings, with a matching necklace and bracelet. She had dark red

lipstick on, making her lips appear fuller than usual. I couldn't believe I had kissed these same lips a week ago.

She hugged me like she always did. It felt odd to embrace in front of so many people.

‘Why so late?’ she said.

‘Took a while to figure out the bus routes.’

‘I told you I would send the car. You and your ego hassles’ she said. ‘Anyway, come.’

She held my wrist and pulled me towards the crowd. We walked towards the pool where her friends stood.

‘Garima, Ayesha and Rachita. You know them, right?’ Riya said.

‘Yes, from the cafe.’

‘Of course,’ Ayesha said. She brushed her hair away from her forehead. The three girls wore expensive dresses and giggled at regular intervals for no apparent reason. Riya introduced me to another girl in a black dress.

‘This is Yamini. We were best friends in Modern School,’ Riya said, hugging Yamini.

‘We *were*. I hear *you* are the best friend now, my competition,’ said Yamini, blowing a curly fringe out of her eyes.

‘Shoo, Yamini,’ Riya said and turned to me. ‘She’s teasing you. Both of you are my buddies.’

I hated that word—buddies. Buddies felt like a pair of stuffed toys placed next to each other, with no romantic spark whatsoever. I had thought after our first kiss that Riya would be more open about us.

I handed over a present to Riya.

‘Oh, thank you,’ she said. ‘But my birthday isn’t until next month.’

She opened the present without asking me.

‘What is it?’ she said as she fingered the fabric inside, trying to make sense of it.

‘It’s a shawl,’ I said. I didn’t have much money to afford a big gift. With winter coining, I thought this would be a nice present. Besides, it was within my budget of five hundred bucks.

‘So thoughtful. This will keep me warm.’ Riya said with a big smile on her face.

‘I hear you play good basketball. Can you beat her?’ Yammi said.

‘I try,’ I said.

‘He’s being modest. He plays state level. Going to be college captain soon.’

‘Handsome college captain,’ Yamini chuckled.

A waiter brought over a tray of snacks.

‘What’s that?’ I said.

‘Sushi,’ the waiter said.

I had never heard that word before. I looked puzzled,

‘It’s fish on rice.’ Yamini said.

I extended my hand to pick up a piece.

‘Raw fish,’ Riya said.

‘What?’ I said and recoiled from the tray.

The girls burst into laughter,

‘It’s okay, Japanese food. Even I don’t eat it,’ Riya said.

‘Your family is vegetarian, right?’ I said.

‘Yes, but our guests are not. It’s for them. Come, let me introduce you to some people.’ Riya grabbed my arm.

‘Hey, Riya, one second,’ Ayesha called from behind.

Riya excused herself and went back. I saw the five girls chat with each other in an animated manner. At one point, everyone apart from Riya laughed; she didn’t seem to find the joke as funny as the others.

‘Sorry,’ Riya said as she rejoined me. ‘Are you having a good time?’

‘Fancy house you have,’ I said as we walked to the other end of the garden.

‘My dad’s and uncles’ house, you mean.’

‘Still, great place.’

‘Thanks,’ she said. ‘Are you having a good time?’

‘I’m with you. That’s how I define a good time.’

She smacked my back with her hand and smiled.

‘So, who am I meeting?’ I said.

‘Dad, Mom and some of their friends.’

‘Dad and Mom?’ I said.

Every guy has a fear of meeting his girl’s parents. Apparently, there is a scientific term for it—soceraphobia.

We reached the bar. A distinguished-looking couple in their early fifties stood with guests.

Riya’s parents held a glass of champagne each. They looked like those people in the Titan watch ads. They wore well-ironed clothes with immaculate accessories. Everything they had on was designer, including their smiles. Riya’s father wore a black bandhgala and gold-rimmed glasses. Riya’s mother wore a gold coloured silk saree.

‘Riya, there you are,’ Mr Soman said. He put his arm around his daughter. ‘Rohan’s been asking for you.’

Riya extracted herself from her father’s embrace and moved aside one step.

‘Hi, Rohan,’ she said. ‘When did you arrive?’

Rohan was a handsome man in his mid-twenties with gelled hair. He wore a black formal suit.

‘Two minutes ago. The parlour took so bloody long to finish my facial,’ Rohan said with a heavy British accent.

Rohan Chandak, I learnt, had come from London three days ago. He and his mother were staying at Riya’s house for the duration of their one-week trip. The Chandaks and the Somanis both hailed from Jaipur, family friends for three generations. The Chandaks had a hospitality business in London. I presumed, like the Somanis, they were rich.

‘Never mind, young man,’ Riya’s father said and patted Rohan’s back. ‘We are so proud of you, beta.’

Mr Soman recited the story of Rohan’s father who had died two years ago. Rohan had taken over the hotel business at a young age and was doing extremely well. Riya and Rohan seemed to have heard the story too many times before and looked embarrassed. Mr Soman went on for three minutes. I checked it against my watch.

‘It’s okay, uncle,’ Rohan said. ‘I just do it to make my mum happy and proud. That’s all.’

Riya’s mother stood next to her husband throughout. Like me, she had not said a word.

‘So, at just twenty-four, running six hotels in London with four hundred rooms, and planning the seventh. So proud of you, son.’ Mr Somani repeated, finally ending his tribute.

I put on an expression of extreme awe and appreciation, as seemed to be expected of me.

‘Not that my daughter Riya is any less. Let me tell you...’ Mr Somani said. Riya interrupted him.

‘Dad. Stop,’ she said, somewhat rude and abrupt, considering she was speaking to her father. Mr Somani smiled and let Riya speak.

‘Dad, I want you to meet Madhav, a good friend of mine from college,’ Riya said.

Mr Somani looked at me. He paused for a second before saying hello. I had worn Shailesh’s best blazer and shirt, but it still didn’t match the clothes of the other guests. Mr Somani, with his impeccable taste, had noticed my less-than-designer outfit.

‘Hello, Madhav,’ Mr Somani said. He shook my hand in an extrafriendly way, as if to compensate for the doubts of a few seconds ago.

‘Good to meet you, sir,’ I said, my insecurities forcing me to say ‘sir’.

‘Madhav what?’ he said. Indians have to know your last name to place you, ‘Madhav Jha,’ I said.

‘Jha, as in...’

‘Bihar. I am from Bihar,’ I said, familiar with the upcoming question. Mr Somani didn’t answer.

Riya broke the awkward silence.

‘And that’s Mom,’ she said.

Riya’s mother smiled and folded her hands. I wished her with a namaste too.

A waiter arrived with a tray of drinks. Rohan took a beer, Riya picked up a glass of wine and Mr Somani helped himself to a whisky. I didn't know what to take so I waved a no.

'Nice party, Somani uncle,' Rohan said.

Mr Somani lifted his glass for a toast. Mrs Somani made an eye movement to indicate that some important guests had just arrived—someone incredibly rich or powerful, or both. Mr and Mrs Somani excused themselves and sidled off.

Riya smiled at me. I smiled back at her, trying my best to fit in.

'So you guys do college together, innit?' Rohan said. His British accent made it hard for me to understand him.

'Yes, different course. Same college.' Riya said.

Rohan was an inch shorter than Riya and five inches shorter than me. However, his age and confidence made us seem like kids answering his questions.

'Basketball, that is wicked,' Rohan said.

'Wicked? Why wicked?' I said.

He laughed, as if he didn't mean it in a bad way. Even Riya smiled. 'What?'

'Nothing. It's such a British English thing,' Riya said.

I guess I didn't understand British or English things.

'How do you like India?' I said, crying to make conversation.

'Grew up here, dude. I left ten years ago,' he said.

I wondered if ten years could completely change a person's accent.

'Stephen's, eh? Top college. You must be pretty damn smart,' Rohan said to me.

'I entered through the sports quota,' I said,

Riya's eyes shuttled between both of us. She watched our man-to-man equation. He was six years older, insanely rich and far more accomplished. He also had a fancy accent, gelled hair and lived in London. I was nothing compared to him. Yet, there was something jerk-like about Rohan Chandak. Or maybe it was just my imagination. At least I'm taller, I told myself to feel better.

‘Riya, babe, you only got guy friends? Or you have some lovely ladies to introduce me to?’

‘Plenty. Come to the poolside.’ Riya said.

‘Yeah. Don’t make me hang out here with the oldies.’

Riya and Rohan turned towards the pool.

‘Hey, Madhav,’ Riya said.

‘Yeah?’

‘Stop looking so lost.’

We rejoined Riya’s gang.

‘Ah, so this is where the loveliest ladies in Delhi hang out,’ Rohan said.

Why couldn’t I think of clever lines like that?

Riya introduced Rohan to everyone. Rohan held each girl’s hand for a second, lifted it and said ‘a pleasure to meet you’ or something like that. It was too much, if you ask me. However, the giggly girls liked it.

‘So you are the London hot-shot,’ Yamini said.

‘From London for sure, madam, but not a hot-shot,’ Rohan said.

Everyone laughed. I think when rich guys say something, girls find it extra funny.

‘Wait a minute, guys,’ Rohan said as he took out his phone from his pocket. ‘Yes, Mummy ji. Everything okay, right? When will you be here? Everyone is asking for you... Okay, don’t be too late. The party can’t start without you.’

I watched Rohan’s face as he stepped aside to take his call. It glowed, perhaps due to the facial he had mentioned, or maybe it was just his mother’s voice.

‘You ladies like to party? Is there a nightclub for afterwards?’ Rohan said when he came back.

‘There’s Agni at the Park,’ Ayesha said, playing with her hair.

I wondered why on earth anyone would leave such a fancy party and go anywhere else. However, rich people like to have options and try different things.

‘You’ve known Riya a long time?’ Rachita asked Rohan.

‘Since she was a little girl,’ Rohan said, ‘I used to be able to lift her easily.’

‘Hah. I was two, you were eight, Rohan.’ Riya said.

‘Yes. Let me try that now,’

Rohan put his glass down. He bent forward and took hold of Riya’s waist. Riya was too startled to protest. A surge of anger ran through my entire body. My fists and face tightened up in a primal response.

Leave her alone, you bastard, I said in my head.

Rohan lifted her off the ground. The girls giggled. He placed Riya back down. It all lasted only two seconds. However, my insides continued to burn long after it was over.

‘You are the quiet type, mate,’ Rohan said to me. ‘What’s up? Need another drink?’

Yeah, I need to drink your blood.

Rohan beckoned to a waiter with drinks and passed me a beer without me asking for it. I didn’t need a beer. I needed to whack this NRI’s head like a slam-dunk shot. I needed alone time with Riya. I needed another accent.

I chugged the beer down in one shot. I did it to assert my fast-diminishing manliness in the group. Everyone watched me in surprise.

‘Mate, that’s rough. Go easy,’ Rohan said.

Riya understood I wasn’t being myself. She looked at me as if to hat the matter was. I turned the other way to avoid eye contact.

The girls gathered around Rohan. He told them stories about his adventures at Indian airports.

‘Madhav, can I talk to you for a second?’ Riya said.

We stepped away from the group.

*

We sat opposite each other on plush white sofas in Riya’s drawing room. Two waiters hovered around us.

‘Can’t we just...’ I said and fell quiet. A waiter brought us a tray of

spring rolls.

'Madhav, so many guests. How are we supposed to be more private?'

'Yeah, fine, I understand,' I said. I picked up two spring rolls. 'Besides, I will see you in college on Monday, right?' she said.

I nodded as I ate the spring rolls. A part of my frustration came from hunger. I felt better after the snack.

'I understand how you feel. In some ways, even I feel like a tourist at these parties,' Riya said.

'What?'

'It's not real. All this. I've lived with this fakeness all my life,' she said.

'And why did you speak to your dad so rudely?'

'Did I? Whatever. He's another fake.'

'C'mon Riya. Don't talk like that.'

'You hate it here, don't you?'

'No, I'm fine. What a grand house you live in. I still can't get over it,' I said, in an attempt to change the topic.

'I hope it doesn't affect us. I'm still the same Riya who plays with you on the dusty court,' she laughed.

'What is "us", Riya?'

'Us. You and me. Our friendship.'

'Riya, we are more than friends.'

'Are we?' She looked at me as if genuinely confused.

'I've never kissed anyone before,' I said.

'Madhav.'

'What?'

'People can hear us.'

'Nobody can hear us.' The loud music in the garden ensured nobody could hear anything.

'We'll talk about this later.'

'You never do,' I said

'I will, I promise. Please cheer up now.'

‘What’s with Mr London? What was he lifting you for?’

Riya laughed. ‘Oh, Ro. Ro is an old buddy. He’s mad.’

She even had a nickname for him, Ro. It means ‘cry’ in Hindi. I wanted Ro to ro.

‘Are you jealous?’

‘Not at all.’

‘Yes, you are.’

‘Whatever, let’s go back in.’

She stood up. ‘You liked my parents?’

I nodded. You can’t say you didn’t like someone’s parents.

‘Good. Come, let’s go in before they start getting ideas.’

Ideas? What ideas? I wanted to ask her.

We walked into the garden. The music drowned out my thoughts. The younger crowd danced around the pool. Rohan danced with Riya’s friends. He called out to us. I wondered if I could pretend to dance and kick Ro into the water.

Of course, I didn’t do that. I refused to dance. I couldn’t embarrass myself in front of this crowd. In Dumraon, we danced like mad people. We played loud music and moved our bodies frantically. Also, men and women never danced together. Here, Rohan danced with each girl for a few seconds. Sometimes, he would hold their hand while dancing, and the girl would be all giggles. What is so funny about a rich guy holding your hand? He even held Riya’s hand once. She twirled around him. My internal organs twirled inside me. I couldn’t do anything but look away.

A waiter came up to me.

‘Are you Madhav jha, sir?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ I said, surprised he knew my name.

‘I am from Dumraon, too.’

‘Oh, how do you know I am from there?’

‘The guard outside told me. Nice to meet you, sir. Feels like I’ve met someone from home.’

The waiter spoke to me for few minutes, shook my hand and left.

Riya raised her eyebrows from the dance floor, wondering what I was doing with the waiter. I shook my head and smiled.

There are things some people can never understand. There's no point telling them.

'Even I have no fucking idea what sushi is,' Ashu said.

'It's Japanese food. How the fuck are we supposed to know? Do they know our litti-chokha?' Raman said.

He dug his fork deep into the mound of biryani piled high on his plate. We were in the dining hall for Sunday dinner and a post-mortem of Riya's party.

'Sushi is no big deal. The bigger deal is she didn't make you feel special,' Shailesh said.

He adjusted his spectacles and drank a glass of water. Shailesh, always the straight talker, had silenced everyone with his statement. The sound of cutlery filled the awkward silence.

'Trouble, brother, trouble,' Shailesh said, after a minute.

'But she kissed him,' Ashu said.

'Toys. Told you about rich people and their toys,' Shailesh said.

I ate my food. My friends further analysed the situation. In my heart I knew Riya didn't see me as a toy. We had a connection. But my heart can be over-imaginative and stupid.

'I'll talk to her,' I said.

'What? Enough talking. Now do,' Raman said.

'Do what?' I said.

Raman shook his head. Everyone smiled.

'Listen, Madhav, I don't want to break your heart. But you do know such a girl is beyond you,' Raman said.

'What do you mean?' I said, putting my fork down on the table.

'Look at them. Look at you. You forgot your aukaat or what?'

Raman had spoken in a flat, controlled voice. However, it hurt. It hurt like he had taken his blunt fork and jabbed it into my chest. It hurt because he didn't think I deserved Riya. It hurt because he had spoken the truth.

'Why does she hang out with me all the time?' I said. 'She can have all the rich friends she wants. In fact, she does.'

‘You are the new exotic creature in her life. She’s bored with everything else,’ Raman said.

‘Are you always this pessimistic?’ Ashu said. Only the fat kid supported me. I transferred the gulab jamun from, my plate on to his.

‘The statistical probability is low,’ Shailesh said, in his academic voice. ‘However, my friend Raman should know that love does happen between classes.’

‘If this is love, why is she avoiding a relationship?’ Raman said. He stood up to leave. He had finished his dinner and what he wanted to say.

Ashu thanked me for the gulab jamun. ‘Raman has no experience with girls. You are doing well. Take it slow. Everything will be fine,’ he said.

‘What do you think, Shailesh?’ I said.

Of the four of us, I trusted Shailesh’s judgement the most. He topped the class and was the most well-read. Of course, like us, he had little experience with women. He drank another glass of water.

‘Yes, don’t rush it. However, don’t stall it either,’ Shailesh said.

‘What does that mean?’ Ashu said on my behalf.

‘Keep it slow, but keep escalating,’ Raman said.

‘Escalating? What? How?’ I said.

‘What’s the clearest sign a girl likes you?’ Shailesh said.

‘She spends time with you?’ I said.

‘Wrong,’ Shailesh said and stood up as well.

‘So then?’ I said.

‘You know the answer. Now do it,’ Shailesh said and left.

*

‘What do you want to talk about?’ Riya said.

She had worn a lemon-coloured chikan salwar-kameez to college that day. We sat under the big banyan tree in between classes. Her hair blew in all directions in the afternoon breeze.

‘Thanks for the party,’ I said.

‘You are welcome. Like I told you, it isn’t really my scene but my

parents wanted to do it.'

'Riya, that's your world. It was me who didn't fit in.'

'I can fit in, but I can't relate to it. I'd rather have a meaningful conversation over chai than catered sushi with plastic smiles.'

'How's Rohan? Sorry, Ro,' I said.

'He made quite an impression on you. He's cool, no?'

'See, you find him cool. That is your world; I said.

'He's over the top and a bit of a show-off. But at least Rohan's fun. The rest are all boring businessmen who only talk money and property.'

'Go have fun then,' I said and looked away from her.

She tugged at my elbow.

'Anyway, forget the party. Eye contact, please.'

Eyes squinting against the mid-morning sun, she draped her yellow dupatta around her face. She looked like a bunch of yellow flowers. I had to be firm. I ignored how cute she was, lest it weaken my resolve.

'What did you want to talk about?' she asked again.

'The kiss,' I said.

Riya giggled. 'I can't believe I am the girl and you are the guy. The guy wants to talk about it.'

'Very funny. Now can we discuss it?'

'What about the kiss? You forced it on me.'

Her answer stumped me. I didn't know what to say.

'I... I did it because...' I fumbled for words.

'Yes, why? Why did you do it, Mr Jha?'

'Because I...I love you.'

Riya burst out laughing. I didn't like her laughter this time.

'Can you please be serious? Your casual behaviour hurts me,' I said.

She composed herself and sat cross-legged under the tree.

'Okay, fine, Madhav, I will be serious. I laughed because I don't think you are in love with me.'

'Oh, really? How do you know that?'

‘Have you been in love before?’

‘No.’

‘So how do you know it’s love?’

Her confusing words left me tongue-tied.

‘How do you know it’s not?’ I said after half a minute.

‘I know it is not, We are both too young, inexperienced but curious. Sure, we like each other. But love? Please.’

‘Riya, you have no idea how much you mean to me. I would do anything for you. Anything,’ I said.

Our eyes locked. For a few seconds, even the articulate Miss Riya Somani didn’t have words.

‘Madhav, you mean a lot to me too. But...’

‘But what?’

‘I am not sure if I want a relationship right now. With anyone.’
How does one answer that? I had no idea.

‘I don’t mean that much to you then,’ I said.

‘We hang out all the time. Aren’t we almost a couple?’

‘So what’s wrong with the next step?’

The bell rang for class. We stood up to leave.

‘What’s the next step, Madhav?’ she said, as we walked towards class.

I scratched my head to think of an answer.

‘Become my girlfriend.’

‘Oh. And what does that involve? Getting physical?’

‘Maybe. That’s often part of it.’

She smiled and shook her head in an all-knowing manner.

We stopped as we reached our respective classrooms.

‘Please, Riya,’ I said. ‘Please be my girlfriend.’

‘Is this a proposal?’ she said.

‘If that’s how you see it.’

‘I’ll think about it.’

‘You’ll tell me after class?’

She grabbed my shoulders and turned me towards my classroom, *

Riya didn't come to college the next day. I briefed my friends-cum-relationship-experts about the proposal while eating lunch in the dining hall.

Shailesh felt I had come across as desperate. Ashu thought I had handled it well.

'Well, did she tell you her decision afterwards?' Raman said, 'No. And today she is absent,' I said.

'See? Desperate. She's skipped college to avoid you,' Shailesh said.

'To avoid me?'

Shailesh shrugged.

'You better get an answer,' Raman said.

'You better *do* it with her,' Shailesh said. Everyone fell silent.

'Do what?' I said. The boys guffawed.

'You guys are sick.'

'She's using you. Time pass until a real guy comes along,' Shailesh said, picking his teeth with a toothpick.

'Ignore Shailesh. Find out why she's absent. Message her,' Ashu said.

'Should I? She's supposed to answer my question,' I said.

The boys didn't answer either. I came to my room after lunch. I had a mobile phone now. Even though expensive, I would use it sometimes to call Riya.

I composed a message. *Did not see you in college. Everything OK?*

I deleted the text and re-typed it three times. Finally, I pressed send.

The worst wait in life is waiting for someone to text back. Riya didn't answer for an hour. It felt like a week. After that one hour, I sent the same message again. That way, it would come across as a double delivery rather than me being desperate. It is funny how, when friendship moves towards a relationship, every message requires awareness and strategy. The second message went, disguised as a screw-up of Airtel.

She didn't reply for another hour. I wanted to call her. It felt lame.

I had proposed to her. The least she could do was give me a reply.

I also felt scared. *What if she said no?* Maybe her silence meant no. *What if she stopped talking to me?* Panic gripped me. I wondered if proposing to her was the worst mistake of my life.

I decided to call her. I typed her number six times. But I did not press the green call button. I didn't have the courage.

My phone beeped. I had a new message. I opened it.

Am sick :(. Viral fever. Resting at home.

Relief coursed through me. She had sent back a normal, harmless message. I wanted to ask about the proposal, but it felt like a bad time. Unsure, I froze. *Why don't they teach us how to talk to girls?*

Get well soon, I sent after rigorous analysis and deliberation in my head.

Thanks, she said.

Miss you, I typed. Before I could think I pressed send.

She didn't respond for a minute. It felt like a decade. Had I messed up again? Was it not the right thing to say?

Then come home. Cheer me up.

Her message felt like a thousand red rose petals on my face. I checked my timetable. Damn, I had four important, un-skippable classes. I couldn't go.

See you in an hour, I said. Classes can wait. Love can't.

10

I knocked on the door of Riya's bedroom, located on the first floor of her house.

'Come in, Madhav,' Riya said and sniffled, 'Meet your sick friend.'

She was in bed, leaning against the backrest with her legs stretched out. She wore a white night-suit with pink dots all over it. She looked like candy, more cute than ill. Viral fever suited her.

'Wait. Come back in again. I should sit with a thermometer in my mouth,' she said.

I smiled and sat on a chair near her bed.

'How are you feeling?' I said.

She shifted to the side and bent to look under the bed. She pulled out a guitar. Strumming it once, she started to sing.

'Terrible, I feel terrible. And I need a hug.'

I looked at her, surprised.

'Because I'm sure. That is my only cure.'

She saw my shell-shocked face and winked at me. Even though she sang as a joke, I loved her voice and the goofy lyrics of her song.

'You sing well,' I said, 'and the guitar-playing is not bad either.'

'Ha ha. I feel terrible. I also sing terribly,' she said.

'No you don't. You're good,' I said.

She smiled and kept her guitar aside. She spread her arms.

'What?' I said.

'I said I need a hug.'

It is funny how women feel they have the right to demand physical affection whenever they want, but men can't. Like a trained pet, I stood up and bent to embrace her.

'You don't have fever,' I said as I held her. Her body felt cold, in fact.

'I did a few hours ago. I took a nap and now I am better.'

'You are fine.'

She mock-frowned. 'I am a sick girl. Please take care of me,' she

said in a baby voice.

I took that as a sign that she was in a good mood. I voiced what had been haunting me for the past twenty-four hours.

‘You didn’t answer my question,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘The proposal.’

‘Baby, why are you doing this to us?’

‘I can say the same thing to you.’

We locked eyes for a few seconds. I came forward to kiss her. She ducked, and my lips landed on her forehead.

‘What?’ I said.

‘That was sweet. I like forehead kisses,’ she said.

I gently took hold of her chin and raised her face. Our eyes met again. I leaned forward to kiss her again.

She moved her face away with a jerk.

‘What, baby?’ I said. If she could call me baby, I could too.

‘No. No, Madhav, no.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t want to. I’m not comfortable.’

‘We did it earlier.’

‘Yes, okay, we did. But I thought about it and I don’t want to.’

‘You don’t want to be with me?’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘Well, are you my girlfriend?’

‘No,’

‘What are we then?’

‘Friends?’

‘You allow friends to hold you like this?’

I had not let her go. She gently moved away.

‘Okay, I’m your half-girlfriend.’

‘What?’

‘Yeah. I’m close to you. We spend time together. We can have affectionate hugs. But nothing more.’

‘Nothing more? What is more?’

‘Well, you know what constitutes more.’

We heard a knock on the door.

‘It’s the maid. Can you sit on the chair again, please?’ she said. I moved back to my seat. The maid brought in a tray with two glasses of orange juice. Riya and I took one each. We sipped our drinks in silence.

I wondered what she meant when she said ‘half-girlfriend’. Where was my expert panel when I needed it?

‘What were you saying? Half?’ I said after the maid left.

She nodded. She seemed clear on what she had in mind.

‘So we are more than friends?’ I said.

‘Well, more than just casual friends ’

‘But I don’t get to kiss you?’

‘You are obsessed with kissing, aren’t you? Is that all I am to you, a pair of lips?’

She finished her glass of juice. It left a thin orange moustache on her face. Yes, I wanted to kiss that orange moustache.

The maid knocked on the door again. She brought in a giant bouquet. It had three dozen fat pink roses with thin silk ribbons tying them together.

‘Wow,’ Riya said. ‘Who sent these? You?’

I shook my head. I couldn’t afford such fancy flowers.

The maid placed the bouquet on the bedside table and left.

‘It’s Rohan,’ Riya said, reading the ‘get well soon’ tag.

‘Isn’t he in London?’

‘Yes, but he has contacts here.’

‘Are you in touch with him?’

‘Aha, my half-boyfriend is already possessive.’

‘I’m just asking.’

‘Not really. Dad must have told him I’m sick.’

‘Why is he sending you flowers?’

‘Don’t read too much into it. He owns hotels. It’s easy for him. His

secretary must have asked a hotel in Delhi to send them.'

I remained silent. I had no idea. Maybe rich people found it normal to send flowers across continents to other rich people who had viral fever. I stood up to leave. She came to the door to see me off. 'So, we cool?' she said.

I nodded. In reality, I didn't know what to say. I needed my friends, like, *now*.

*

I summoned my expert panel for an urgent meeting. All of us sat cross-legged on the grass lawns outside Rudra. I narrated my conversation with Riya, my failed attempts at kissing her, her frequent hugs and Imally the deal on the table—half-girlfriend. I skipped the flower delivery, though. I didn't want to bring another variable or person into the picture.

'Half isn't bad. Depends on how you look at it,' Ashu said. 'Half-empty or half-full.'

I idly tugged at blades of grass, waiting for everyone in my expert panel to make their opening remarks.

'Pretty sucky, if you ask me,' Shailesh said.

'Pessimist,' Ashu said. 'Always glass is half-empty.'

'No. The half that is missing is pretty vital,' Shailesh said.

'Raman?' I said.

Raman let out a deep sigh. 'Fuck, if a girl won't get physical with you, it's a warning sign,' he said.

'Hell, it's more than a warning sign,' Shailesh said. 'It's a fire brigade siren on maximum volume using thousand-watt amplifiers. Don't you get it, Mr Dumraon? She is playing with you.'

'Ashu, you agree?' I said.

The fat Bihari, always soft and supportive, looked me in the eye. 'Do you like her?' he said.

'Yes,' I said.

'Do you trust her?'

'I think so. The way she hugged me again and again. Or how she

called me home. Or how she sits in her night clothes in front of me. I don't know. It means something, right?'

'What is your gut feeling?'

'My gut is bloody confused. That's why I am asking you guys.'

An army of intellectual men cannot solve the riddle created by an indecisive woman. My limited-experience panel struggled for words.

'Say no. No half-girlfriend. All or nothing,' Shailesh said.

'All means what?' I said.

'All means she is your girlfriend, in private and in public,' Raman said.

I pondered over their advice. At one level they made sense.

However, when I was with Riya, she also seemed to make sense.

'What do I do? She asked if we were cool and I nodded,' I said.

'This stuff is not discussed. This stuff is done,' Shailesh said.

'How?'

'Call her to your room.'

'And then?' I said.

The three boys looked at each other and smiled meaningfully. 'And then *what?*' I said.

'Make Bihar proud,' Raman said and squeezed my shoulder.

We had practised for less than ten minutes when she got a stomach cramp. She held her stomach and gestured to stop the game.

‘I’m not fully okay after the viral attack,’ she said.

She walked off the court and sank to the ground. She buried her face in her hands.

‘I need to rest. And I’m a little cold in these.’ She pointed to her extra-small red shorts. They barely covered her upper thighs.

‘You should have told me. We need not have played today,’ I said.

‘I’ll be fine,’ she said. She removed her hands from her face and smiled at me.

It had been a week since my panel recommended taking Riya to my room again. ‘Make Bihar proud, else you don’t matter’ is what they had repeated to me all week. Today, I had the chance.

‘Hey, you want to rest in my room?’ I said.

‘Sneak in?’

I played it cool. ‘Yeah. You rest. Take a nap. I can study, or will even leave the room if you want me to.’

‘You don’t have to leave your own room.’ She stood up.

She had said I didn’t have to leave. It meant she had agreed to come to Rudra. Girls never tell you anything straight out anyway. You have to interpolate and extrapolate their responses to figure out what’s on their mind.

*

I smuggled her in again. As I shut the door of my room, I knew my moment of truth had come. *Make Bihar proud, make yourself count*, I repeated in my head.

Riya sat on the bed, legs extended straight.

‘Lie down,’ I said.

‘I’m not that sick, just need to rest,’ Riya said and smiled. ‘I see you’ve cleaned up your room.’

‘Well, it’s still not as fancy as yours.’

‘It’s a room in my father’s house. How I wish I could stay in a hostel like you.’

‘Hey, would you like to change?’ I said, switching topics. ‘You said you were cold.’

She had a change of clothes in her rucksack.

‘Where?’ she said. ‘I can’t use the bathroom here.’

‘You could change here.’

‘Ha ha, nice try, mister.’

‘I meant I could leave the room.’

‘Oh, really? Such a gentleman.’

I had learnt to ignore her sarcasm. I shrugged.

‘I’m fine in these,’ she said.

‘I’m not,’ I said.

‘Why?’

‘Those shorts. They distract me.’

‘These red shorts?’

‘Well, the legs, to be precise. The legs the shorts are unable to hide.’

Riya laughed. She took a bedsheet and covered herself.

‘Here. Better, mister? Now what? You want to study?’

Damn, I had lost my view.

‘Yeah. You’ll rest?’

‘Yes,’ Riya said and sniggered.

‘What?’

‘Like that’s going to happen.’

‘Of course it is,’ I said and turned away from her. I sat on the chair, switched on the table lamp and opened my sociology textbook.

Riya sat on the bed. She seemed amused and somewhat stumped at me letting her be. A few minutes later, she lay down on the bed. ‘What are you studying?’ she said, her eyes closed.

‘Social uprisings in the early twentieth century.’

‘How are your grades?’

‘Not bad, but I’m no topper.’

I went back to my book.

‘What do you want to do after graduation?’ she said. Girls cannot stand being ignored, that too for a textbook.

‘I’ve told you fifty times. Work in Delhi for a few years and then go back to Dumraon.’

‘Hmm,’ she said, her eyes still closed. She sounded like the nosey uncles who ask you questions only to dismiss your answers with a ‘hmm’.

‘Let me study, Riya. You also rest.’

I didn’t have a strategy, but I did have an intuition on how to proceed. Don’t act too interested at first; she will just launch into a lecture.

My curt responses puzzled her. I shut her up whenever she tried small talk. Finally, she grew quiet.

‘I’m tired,’ I said, after half an hour of silence.

‘I’m sleeping. Don’t disturb,’ she said. It was her turn to act pricey.

‘I also want to sleep.’

‘Stay there. I’m a patient. The patient is resting,’ she said, suppressing a smile.

I shut my textbook. I went to the side of the bed and sat down.

‘Riya?’ I said, my voice soft.

She didn’t respond, as if asleep. I lifted the quilt covering her. Her tiny shorts had bunched up even further. I couldn’t help but stare at her legs. She pulled the quilt back over her as a reflex. A girl knows she is being stared at, even in her sleep. I lay down next to her. I took care to have the least amount of body contact. I shared some of the quilt and shut my eyes.

We lay still for two minutes. She turned to her side, Her nose poked into my right shoulder. Her hand touched my elbow. Even with my eyes closed, I felt her warmth next to me. I turned to face her, pretending to be asleep. Casually, I placed my left arm on her. She didn’t protest. My left hand touched her long hair. Her nose was now buried in my chest and I could feel her gentle breath on me. I slid my

hand down her back and moved her closer towards me.

She continued to sleep, or continued to pretend to sleep.

I placed my leg over hers, my boldest move yet. The smooth bare skin of her leg touched mine. Electric sparks shot through me. I resisted the urge to kiss her. I let my hand slide further down her back. As I reached her lower back, her voice startled me.

‘Mr Jha,’ she said.

‘Yes, Miss Somani.’

‘This is not called sleeping,’

‘You can sleep.’

‘Oh, really? How do you expect me to with you all over me?’

I laughed. I brought her closer and lifted her face. I tried to kiss her but she turned away.

‘Control yourself, Madhav,’ she said.

She tried to extricate herself. I didn’t let go.

‘Why?’ I said.

‘That is what we agreed to.’

‘But why?’

‘Just. Oh my God, I just felt your... Madhav, let me go.’

‘Riya, come on.’

‘Can you just let me go? You are hurting me.’

I let her go. She slid to the edge of the bed, away from me.

‘I want you.’

‘No.’

‘Please let me.’

‘No.’

‘You have to.’

‘What do you mean I have to?’ she said.

She sat up on the bed. She glared at me, her posture stiff.

However, I was too consumed with my own feelings to cave in at this point. I had waited and played the patience game for too long. I expected her to yield to me now.

‘What is your problem?’ I said.

‘What is your problem? I’m not a release for your horniness.’

‘I didn’t say you were.’

‘So why can’t you just stick to what we discussed? Nothing physical. Just close friends.’

‘That doesn’t work.’

‘Fine, maybe we can’t even be friends.’

I couldn’t answer her. I had run out of strategies and clever responses. She stepped off the bed, straightened her clothes and picked up her rucksack to leave.

Anger mixed with desire. I grabbed her hand.

‘You can’t just play with me. I’m not your toy.’

‘Toy?’

‘You are using me. Until another guy comes along.’

‘Whatever. You are trying to use me. Ruining a perfect friendship. Bye.’

I pulled her close to me. She sat on the bed again, right next to me.

‘It isn’t a perfect friendship. I am not fully satisfied.’

She didn’t like my answer.

I bent forward to kiss her. She moved her face again.

‘Only once.’

‘No.’

‘Please.’

‘I said no,’ she said, her voice firm.

‘I’m at my limit, Riya.’ I grabbed her shoulders.

‘Madhav, I haven’t seen this side of you. You are using physical force on me.’

‘I want to say something.’

‘What?’

‘Deti hai to de, warna kat le.’

‘What?’

I had said it in coarse Bhojpuri-accented Hindi. I had said: ‘make love to me, or leave’. Actually, that sounds respectable. If I had to make an honest translation, I would say: ‘fuck me, or fuck off’. Hell,

even that sounds way better than how I said it.

I don't know what came over me that day. Maybe I just couldn't wait anymore. Perhaps I felt insecure and scared. Most likely I am a crass Bihari from Dumraon whose true animal nature had come out. I realized I had spoken filth. I tried to take it back.

‘What the hell did you just say?’

‘Nothing. Listen, I just.

I released my grip. Before I could collect my thoughts, Riya Somani had collected her belongings and left.

*

She refused to take my calls. She didn't reply to any of my twenty-seven messages. I waited for her at the college entrance every morning.

She stepped out of her BMW, ignored me and walked quickly into her classroom.

During breaks she surrounded herself with her girlfriends. When I approached her in the cafeteria, she took out her phone and pretended to be on a call ‘That was a bit much,’ Shailesh said. I had told my friends about the debacle in my room. They had listened with much interest, hoping for a story with titillating action. Instead, they heard of a total fiasco. When I repeated the ‘deti hai...’ line I had said to Riya, even my thick-skinned friends cringed. We spoke filth sometimes but nobody would ever talk like that to a girl. I, the idiot, had spoken like that to the woman I loved, worshipped, adored and respected more than anyone else on earth.

‘Fix this disaster, rather than focusing on intimacy right now,’ Ashu had said, his tone irritated.

Weil, I had tried to fix it. Riya just wouldn't meet me. Helpless, I had no option but to stalk her. I had to talk to her alone. I swore to myself not to say a word of Hindi, lest it come out crudely again.

I did find her alone, finally. She sat in the library, immersed in her textbook, poring over the history of European literature. She wore a red-and-white salwar-kameez with black earrings, ‘Riya,’ I whispered.

She stood up to change her seat.

‘Two minutes, I beg you,’ i said.

She ignored me. She moved to another table full of students. I couldn’t talk to her thete.

‘I’m waiting outside,’ I said. Ten students looked up at me, startled. Riya continued to read the same page.

I waited outside the library for two and a half hours When she came out, she saw me and walked in the other direction.

‘Two minutes,’ I said as I ran up to her.

‘I don’t want to talk to you, at all. Understand?’

‘I’ll keep following you. Might as well talk.’

She glared at me and stood still, her hands balling into fists.

‘Your time has started,’ she said.

‘Listen, I am really, really sorry,’

She crossed her arms, textbook still in hand.

‘Don’t waste your time. Sorry is not going to work.’

‘I didn’t mean it,’

‘Why did you say it? Do you knew how it made me feel?’ She stared into my eyes. I looked away. Tin a reserved person, Madhav, I have issues opening up to people. I trusted you. And you...’ She bit her lower lip.

‘I just...’

‘Just what? The stuff you said. I may not speak much Hindi, but I do understand it, Madhav,’ she said and turned her face sideways. Then she said as if to herself, ‘My friends had warned me about you.’

‘I just love you, Riya.’

‘Yeah, right. Indeed a classy way to show love.’

‘I said it in anger.’

‘Let me be clear. I have never, ever been spoken to in such a cheap manner in my life. I let you into my world. We had something together.’

‘We do.’

‘No, we don’t. If you could speak to me like that, I wonder how

you think of me in your mind.'

'I wanted to be close to you. Never let you go.'

'You said "deti hai to de, varna kat le". Does that sound like being close?'

'It's my useless friends, they provoked me. They said, sleep with her or else she'll never be yours.'

'You discussed this with your friends first?'

'Not everything but...'

'But stuff like "let me go fuck her today".'

Before I could respond she raised a hand to silence me. 'I'm going to say something now. Listen carefully. Okay?' she said, her voice shaky as she tried to maintain her composure.

'Sure.'

'One, don't ever try to talk to me. Two, we are not friends anymore. I have promised my friends and myself I will choose my friends carefully. Three, stop hounding me, it's disturbing. I don't want to tell my parents or the college authorities.'

'Riya...'

'Please go now,' she said and folded her hands, as if pleading with me.

I took one last look at her-her beautiful but angry and sad face, the long hair I had stroked, the lips I had kissed once - and turned around. I heard the sound of her footsteps get fainter as she walked away.

Six months later

After my break-up, or half-break-up, with Riya, my personality changed. People in college started to call me SSS, or the Silent Saint of Stephen's. I attended every class and sat in the front row. I took notes like a court stenographer. I never asked the professor any questions. I would sit with my friends in the residences but not contribute to the conversation. Initially, they tried to cheer me up. They gave me copies of Playboy and arranged booze parties to help me get over Riya. However, just like their earlier advice, their break-up cures were useless too. The only thing that helped somewhat was basketball. Every time I thought of her, I hit the court. Three hours of dribbling and shooting temporarily cured my heartache, if only because it left me physically exhausted. Frankly, I went to the courts in the hope she would come to practice. She never did. Perhaps her father had built her a court in the backyard of 100, Aurangzeb Road.

Sometimes I lurked in the college corridors, waiting for her class to end. I stood far away and avoided eye contact. I would watch her come out of class, only to disappear into a crowd of friends. Once she did see me. She didn't smile or turn away. She didn't even look angry. She didn't react at all. It killed me. If she had come forward and slapped me or yelled, I would have been okay. However, she looked right through me, as if I didn't exist.

Nights hit me the hardest. I couldn't sleep. I lay on the same bed where I had messed it up with her. The same place where I had spoken like a Bhojpuri movie villain. I wished I had a time machine to undo my actions. I didn't want a time machine to predict the stock market or buy property cheap. I only wanted it to un-say that sentence. I had said it in a combined state of horniness, bravado and stupidity. Well, it is also the state in which men are most of the time.

I tossed and turned. I couldn't sleep. I bounced my basketball on

the room's wall back and forth until the student in the adjacent room shouted curses. I studied my course books to distract myself. I found books in the library on psychology, relationships and love. Through these I tried to figure out women. Either the English was too tough or the books gave contradictory ideas. I ended up being more confused than ever. Women like to nurture and have long-term relationships, one study said. However, I had wanted exactly that. So why did the study fail to explain this? Anything I read about women in newspapers I connected with Riya. If an actress gave an interview saying she was moody, I nodded and felt that, yes, even Riya was moody.

I had to get this girl out of my head. I couldn't.

A few months later it was my birthday. I sat with my friends in the cafeteria. As luck would have it, Riya entered at the same time with her friends. My friends wanted to see if she would wish me. They started singing, 'Happy birthday to you. Madhav', even as I cut a mince cutlet. The girls noticed but ignored us. Riya didn't even flinch. My heart crumbled like the mince cutlet.

'You're lucky. It's best such an insensitive girl is out of your life,' Raman said.

One afternoon, after college ended, I was sitting outside on the main lawn. Students turned their gaze to the main gate as a car entered the college.

It was a beautiful car. It looked expensive even from twenty metres away.

'It's a Bentley. Costs over two crores,' a boy sitting close to me told his friend. A young man stepped out of the car. He wore shades. He walked as if he owned the college.

Riya Somani emerged from the main building and walked towards the Bentley. I stood up and walked towards the driveway. I ensured I could not be seen; not that anyone was interested in me.

The man's face seemed familiar. Riya went up to him. They hugged. I noticed the man was an inch shorter than Riya.

Rohan Chandak, the name popped into my head. *What's this*

asshole doing here? It's amazing how quickly the mind switches from figuring out a situation to commenting on it.

I had no idea why Rohan had come to college. Maybe he wanted to buy the building and turn it into a hotel. Well, that seemed unlikely as he didn't enter the building. Both of them got into the Bendey and it drove off, with Riya's BMW tailing Rohan's car. The students in the lawns released collective oohs and aahs.

'I also want a loaded boyfriend,' I heard a girl near me say.

'Is he her boyfriend?' I asked her. I shouldn't have but I did. Like I'd proved earlier, my impulse control is rather weak.

'How do I know?' she said and walked away.

I could still smell the burning fumes from Rohan's Bentley long after he had left. Or maybe it was my burning insides.

*

I had to talk to Riya. I decided to do it during Harmony, the annual cultural festival of St. Stephen's. It would be my final attempt to rescue our friendship. The festival had various cultural competitions such as choreography, music, debates and treasure hunts. Students, including the day-skis, stayed in the college until late at night. Riya had already won the music competition in the solo English vocals category. She was also taking part in Western choreography.

I took my place in the audience early, sitting in the front row facing the makeshift choreography stage on the front lawns. Boys from all over Delhi University had gatecrashed. They sat at the right vantage points to ogle at the St. Stephen's chicks. Some of these boys resembled men back home. They spoke loudly in Hindi. They whistled every time a pretty girl came on stage. Stephanians, of course, hated all this. We were way too dignified to express our lecherous feelings in such a public manner. We ogled nonetheless, but in a dignified way.

A dozen girls wearing pink tights and silver-grey tops came on stage. Riya, the tallest amongst them and the easiest to spot, stood in the centre. Stage lights changed colours. A commentator spoke in a husky self-important voice. He spoke about evolution and how all life

emanates from nature. It is stuff that sounds profound when you hear it but is total bullshit when you look back and think about it.

Riya's lean frame, athletic body and stunning looks meant most men had their eyes on her. Of course, another girl with a massive bust had her own set of fans.

As the commentator spoke his lines in a sexy voice, I rehearsed mine in my head.

'Riya, I think people deserve a second chance.'

Riya did cartwheels on stage with incredible grace. The crowd burst into applause as she did a perfect cartwheel.

Inside my chest, my heart did the same.

'Riya, not a day—*not a day*—passes when I don't think of you,' I said to myself. I deleted it from my mental shortlist. It sounded too keen. Girls are difficult. It is all about finding the right balance. You can neither be too pushy, nor come across as too cool to care. I suck at this fine balance.

In the last act, Riya took a handheld mic and sang the two closing lines about nature and how we need to protect it. Her clear and tuneful voice earned a round of spontaneous applause.

The show ended. The girls came forward to take a bow. The crowd cheered. I slipped out and then sprinted to the classroom converted into a green room. Finger-combing my hair, I knocked on the door.

A female student peeked out.

'What?'

'I need to talk to someone.'

'Sorry, only girls allowed inside.'

'Is Riya Somani there?'

'She is changing, Wait.'

I had little choice. I sat on a ledge opposite the classroom. I waited for thirty minutes. A group of girls came out, giggling for no particular reason. Riya didn't.

Forty-five minutes later, dressed in black jeans with silver buttons and a tight black top, Riya stepped out. In a deliberate act, she took

brisk steps away from me.

‘Riya,’ I said.

She stopped. However, she didn’t turn towards me. Her hands froze, as if uncomfortable.

‘Please,’ I said.

She semi-turned towards me.

‘Hi, Madhav.’

I stood squarely in front of her.

‘I want to talk. Five minutes,’ I said.

‘Anything important?’

‘To me it is. Five minutes?’

‘I’m listening.’

We stood in a dark corridor, facing each other stiffly, as it in confrontation. It didn’t seem like the right place to talk. I saw her face. She was still the most beautiful woman in the world to me. Even though we were in the middle of what seemed like a world war, I wanted to kiss her. That is how sick the male mind is. It can forget the entire context of a situation and follow its own track.

‘I said I’m listening,’ she said. I flushed out the sick thoughts front my mind.

‘Not here. Somewhere private?’

‘Oh, really?’ she said.

I realized it had come out all wrong.

‘Sorry, not like that. Somewhere we can sit, face to face. And it isn’t so dark.’

‘The cafe?’ she said.

‘Now? It’s packed with the DU crowd. You won’t get a table.’

‘Listen, I have plans. I have to go,’ she said.

‘Okay, the cafe then. Fine.’

We walked to the cafe. As expected, lines to enter extended all the way outside.

‘It is crowded. Is it okay if we talk in my car?’ she said.

I looked at her. She seemed to have calmed down a little.

‘Yeah. The driver will be there, right?’

‘I’ll send him away. Actually, let’s go to the car. I need to give you something, too.’

13

We walked out to her car. She handed her driver a fifty-rupee note.

‘Driver bhaiya, can you go and buy a few packets of Parle-G biscuits for me, please?’

The driver looked puzzled.

‘Madam, we will buy it on the way?’

‘No, go now. Leave the keys. I’ll wait inside’

The confused driver handed the keys to Riya and left.

Riya and I sat in the backseat of her BMW. A fat armrest separated us. She switched on the reading light and slipped her feet out of her shoes. Turning side-ways, she leaned back against the window to face me. She tucked her feet under her legs on the seat.

I sat stiffly. The BMW reminded me how out of place I was in her world.

‘So?’ Riya said.

‘You were really great on stage. And congrats on winning the English vocals.’

‘Oh, thank you. That’s nice of you, Madhav, to congratulate me.’

‘Amazing show,’ I said, clearing my throat.

‘Thanks. Is that all you wanted to say to me?’

I shook my head. I hated it when she adopted this formal tone.

‘So let’s skip the small talk. Say what you want to.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Have heard it a million times from you.’

‘Forgive me.’

‘I have forgiven you. I have also moved on. It’s past. It’s over. So, that’s it?’

I looked into her eyes. In the dim reading light of the BMW, I could not spot any emotion on her face. I felt weak in her presence.

I fought back tears.

‘I want us to be friends again,’ I said.

‘Why?’ she said, her voice as cold as Delhi’s foggy winter night.

Did she miss nothing about me or what we had?

Because I miss you, damn it! I wanted to scream at the top of my voice. Of course, I couldn't. I had lost the right to express any words, let alone any emotions, to her. I had to say something reasonable, underplaying what I felt.

'So I have a chance to show you I am not a jerk,' I said.

'I am sure you are not. I take your word for it. You don't have to show me.'

Riya is too clever, too smart and sometimes too icy. She left me speechless. I had a sinking feeling something was not going right.

However, she touched my hand on the armrest. Her soft fingers pressed into my wrist, as if checking my pulse.

'Listen, Madhav,' she said. 'I am sorry I am being this way. Cold and aloof.'

Her warm touch melted my resolve to keep my composure. I loved her touch but I wished she would remove her fingers. I didn't know if I could hold back my tears anymore.

'Please,' I said. It sounded needy. I hated myself for saying it.

'Madhav, I'm not angry with you anymore. It is anyway not possible for us to be friends again. I am leaving.'

'What?'

'I'm leaving college.'

'What? Like quitting?'

She nodded.

'I'm dropping out.'

'You're in the second year. You won't finish your degree?'

'Never cared much for formal education.'

I looked at her, shocked.

'Of course, I can say that because my dad's rich. It's okay if you think that I'm a quitter.'

'No, I didn't think that. All I'm thinking is, why?'

She shrugged.

'You're dropping out of St. Stephen's. There must be a reason.'

Our eyes met. Maybe it was my imagination but, for a moment, I felt the same connection to her as I had in the past.

‘I don’t think you want to know.’

‘I do,’ I said. ‘Of course I do.’

‘You will judge me.’

‘Have I ever?’

She kept quiet.

‘Riya, have I ever judged you? You judged me and threw me out of your life.’

‘Madhav, please.’

‘Let’s not go there. Yeah, fine. Anyway, are you still thinking about quitting or is it final?’

‘Pretty final.’

‘Why?’

She took a deep breath.

‘Open the glove box.’

‘What?’

She pointed to the storage box below the dashboard. Puzzled, I reached over and opened it. It had three red cardboard boxes inside.

‘Take one,’ she said.

I picked up a box and sat back on my seat. The velvet-lined red box had golden leaves embossed on it.

‘Open it.’

I switched on the reading light on my side of the car. I lifted the red-gold lid of the box.

Inside, I found a red envelope on top of a silk pouch. The card and the pouch had ‘R and R’ on it.

‘What?’ I said.

She gestured with her eyes that I look further.

I held the envelope in one hand and the pouch in the other. The pouch contained pieces of chocolate wrapped in silver paper. I put the pouch aside and opened the card.

I read a couple of lines. My head swam.

‘What?’ I turned to Riya.

‘I told you, you don’t want to know.’

I composed myself and summoned the resolve to read the full card. It went like this: *Shri Vishnu Somani and Shrimati Kala Devi Somani humbly invite you to the wedding of their granddaughter So. Riya Somani*

(d/o Mr Mahendra Somani and Mrs Jayanti Somani) with Chi. Rohan Chandak

(s/o Late Shri Manoj Chandak and Jamna Bai Chandak) on 25 January 2007 at 8p.m.

at the Taj Palace Hotel, Delhi Programme and RSVP details attached. Request no gifts.

I didn’t read the other cards in the box, which had details of the other ceremonies. I simply sat there frozen. I clutched the silk pouch like a stress ball and looked straight ahead.

‘It happened so fast,’ Riya said.

I remained quiet. Shock waves ran through me. Numb, I traced the golden embroidery on the pouch.

‘A part of me can’t believe it is happening,’ she said, to fill the awkward silence.

‘You’re getting married?’ I whispered, my tone unusually calm, my gaze still averted.

‘In two months,’

I smirked and turned to her. ‘Wow, Riya. I’ve never faced such a dodge, even on the basketball court.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I wanted us to be friends again. But you are leaving college. Getting married.’

‘That’s life, I guess.’

‘You’re nineteen.’

‘Will turn twenty after the wedding, later the same year.’

‘Have you gone mad, Riya?’

‘You’ve lost the right to talk to me like that,’ she said.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘It’s fine. Madhav, it is my choice. Nobody is forcing me. I want to leave.’

‘Why?’

‘I never wanted to do this course. I don’t want to be near my sexist relatives.’

‘You could finish your degree. Go abroad later to study. Why marriage?’

‘I want adventure, travel and excitement. Rohan promises all that.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yeah. He’s crazy. He keeps me entertained. He’s also well settled. What’s wrong with marrying him?’

‘He’s rich.’

‘So? Is that his only flaw? So am I.’

‘Not a flaw. Just an observation. He couldn’t wait for you to finish college? He wants you to drop out?’

‘Well, he doesn’t care either way. It’s his family. They want him to get married soon. My parents don’t want to risk losing a match like him, too.’

‘Riya, nobody drops out of college like this.’

‘People abroad do it all the time.’

‘Not in India.’

‘Oh, come on. Most of India needs a degree to get a job and make a living. I don’t need that, right?’

She wasn’t wrong. Losers like me need to study, else we have no future. People who are born at 100, Aurangzeb Road can do whatever they want in life.

‘Even Rohan joined an MBA and never finished it.’

‘Is Rohan your boyfriend?’

Well, he will be my husband,’ Riya said.

‘That’s not what I asked.’

‘We are getting closer. Of course, I always called him Rohan bhaiya when I was growing up, so it’s an adjustment,’ she said. She laughed at

her own joke. I wished someone had strangled Rohan at the 'bhaiya' stage. That bastard had seemed like trouble right from Riya's party.

I wanted to say something sensible. I wanted to turn the tide even somewhat in my favour. Of course, God had not given me the brains to do so. Neither was my timing right. A girl giving you her wedding card is basically like a giant 'Game Over' sign flashing in a video game. It is not the time to say you want her back. Or that you love her more than anything else on earth. I wondered if I should act supportive.

I wondered if I should ask her about the preparations, or if she needed any help. I stopped myself. I could not sink that low.

The situation reminded me of what my friends used to tell me.

I was indeed a toy. I felt like Woody from the movie Toy Story. In the film, Woody, a neglected toy, cries alone because his owner grows up and no longer plays with him.

'Say something,' she said.

You bloody bitch, my impulsive mind suggested. I controlled myself.

Please don't do this. I love you so much, said the emotional side of my mind. I realized my head was a mess right now. Given my track record, saying anything would only mean regretting it later.

'What do I say? Surprised. Shocked. I don't know.'

'People normally say congratulations.'

'Yeah,' I said, but didn't congratulate her.

'I hope we can move past whatever happened. We can, right?' she said.

I nodded.

'You will come?'

'Where?'

'The wedding. I just invited you.'

I wanted to throw her over-the-top wedding invitation box-cum-card at her.

'Let's see,' I said. I patted myself mentally. I had responded with

more dignity than I thought I had. 'Go fuck yourself' would have been a more natural response.

'Please do come,' she said.

'Are you sure you're doing the right thing?' I managed to say one more time.

'I'm following my heart. That's usually doing the right thing, right?'

'I don't know. Sometimes following your heart leads you nowhere.'

I looked at her to see if she understood my sly comment. She did, and gave a wry smile.

'I am sorry, Madhav, if I hurt you.'

I nodded to reassure her that hurting me was no big deal. Pretty girls have the right to hurt men. I found it hard to breathe. I switched off the reading light. That way, in case I started crying, my tears would not be visible.

I heard a knock on the car's door. The driver was back.

'Here, madam,' the driver said. He handed her four packets of Parle-G.

She passed the biscuits to me. 'Please take them for Rudra. I'm addicted to these. If I keep them in the car I'll eat them all.'

'You asked him to get it.'

'Only so he would leave us alone.'

I kept the packets, my consolation prize. Rohan gets Riya. Madhav gets biscuits.

I opened the car door and stepped out.

She stepped out from her side and walked up to me.

'Bye,' she said.

'Bye, Riya,' I said. It was hard to hold back my tears forever. I wanted her to leave.

'Hey, you forgot something,' she said.

'What?' I said.

'Your card.'

She reached into the car and handed me the evil red box once again, with the cards and the chocolates. I somehow managed to hold everything along with the biscuit packets.

‘Oh, thanks,’ I said. I wondered where the nearest dustbin was.

‘Take care then,’ she said and came forward for a basic goodbye hug.

I stepped back. I didn’t want any more fake hugs.

She understood my hesitation and withdrew with grace. She smiled at me one last time and slid into her car. The BMW slipped away with its silent elegance, as if nothing had happened.

The car took a left turn from Hindu College and was soon out of sight. I sat down on the road. The red box and its contents lay around me, almost like hardened blood.

I cried. The desolate campus road meant nobody could see me. I let it all flow out. Months of pain condensed into tears. A car passed by. I probably looked like a Delhi beggar, complete with biscuit packets around me.

After a while, I collected everything from the road and stood up. I walked up to the dustbin outside the main gate of the college. I removed the chocolates and biscuits and stuffed them in my pocket. I threw away everything else.

Even though I was in pain, I remembered the golden rule: if you live in a hostel, never throw away food.

One year and three months later

'So tell us why you're here,' said a thirty-year-old man. He wore a red tie and a crisp white shirt.

I was at HSBC's placement interview, facing a panel of three bankers. Each wore a pained and bored expression. They had heard over forty Stephanians talk nonsense about their greatness. Each candidate had solved all the problems India faced, redesigned the bank's strategy and promised to work harder than apartheid-era slaves. Why do companies bother with such interviews? Perhaps it makes them feel better to talk about the problems of the world, even though the actual job involves sitting at a desk and punching formulas into spreadsheets.

I had no answer for my panel. I didn't know why I had applied to them, or for any job at all. I hated Delhi. I flashbaked to my college life. Yes, I'd loved it when I had first joined college. The first year had gone by so quickly it had felt like a vacation. The second year was painful, with Riya breaking up with me. However, she was at Itast around. I could steal a glance at her every now and then, be rejected every couple of months and still remember the good times. I had something then that keeps people going during the worst times—hope.

I dreamt Riya would come around one day. She would realize I was her perfect partner—in terms of height, basketball, mental connect, how hours felt like minutes when we were together and how little we cared about the rest of the world. She never did. She slapped a wedding card on me and left. My Bihari gang had made me swear on my mother I would never contact her again. I didn't. She quit college in a couple of weeks. She had a lavish wedding, Stephanians who attended it said afterwards. I'm sure Rohan spent the colleges entire annual budget on the wedding reception. I overheard that Riya had gone to Bora Bora for her honeymoon. The name of the place sounded

like it was in Bihar. However, I googled it and discovered it was a set of beautiful islands in the Pacific Ocean, some reachable only by private plane. Which ruled out me going there and murdering the groom.

However, the pain of the second year felt like a tickle compared to the third year. Third year sucked. I had zero ability to get over her.

I couldn't believe a girl who had left me a year ago had such a grip on me. We had not even slept together. However, it mattered little. She was the only girl I had played, walked, eaten, talked, studied and had fun with. I had peeked into Silent Riya more than anyone else, or so I thought. How could I forget her?

Well, I could not forget her from two years ago, but I had forgotten the interview room I had entered two minutes ago.

'I said, what brings you here?' the interviewer repeated and sipped from his bottle of water.

'Yes, sir. I am here because...' I fumbled to remember the company's name. 'Because HSBC is a dynamic place to work in and I want to be a part of it.'

Given my cut-paste answer, I thought he would splash his water on my face. However, he didn't.

'Madhav Jha, right?' said another member of the panel, reading my resume.

'State-level basketball, impressive. Shortlisted for national team trials last year. Did you make it?'

'No, sir.'

'Why not?'

I hesitated for a second and then gave my answer. 'I didn't go for the trials.' Basketball reminded me of her. After she left, I never went to the court.

'Why?' all three of them asked together.

'I couldn't. I was under stress.'

'What kind of stress?' said the first interviewer.

'Personal.'

The other interviewers cleared their throat. They nodded their heads at each other, communicating the need to skip that question, 'Why do you want to do banking?' the third panellist said.

'Because that is what you want me to do.'

'Excuse me?' The panellist blinked,

'Well, I need a job. Yours is one of those available. And you pay well. So yes, I'll do whatever you want me to.'

'You don't have a preference?'

'Not really.'

I don't know what made me talk like this. Perhaps it was the fact that I had given eight interviews over the past two weeks and I had lied in every one of them. I had finally had enough. I didn't want to be in Delhi anymore. I missed my mother. I wanted to call her right now.

'Madhav, do you want this job?' the first panellist said.

'What's your name, sir?' I asked instead.

'Shukla. I am Pramod Shukla. Regional manager for North India.'

'Mr Shukla, are you happy?'

'Excuse me?'

'You don't look happy. None of you look happy. Nobody wants this job. Everyone wants the money you offer. You see the difference?'

The panellists looked at each other. If I had a camera, the picture of their priceless expressions could have won any photography competition.

'I like you. The first honest candidate we have had. I will hire you,' Pramod said.

The other two looked shocked. However, they were too junior to counter the boss's whim.

'But I don't want it,' I said and stood up.

'Why?' Pramod said. 'Private banking in Delhi. Top clients. Six lakhs a year.'

'No, sir. I am done serving rich people,' I said and left the room.

*

As I walked back to my residence after the interview, for the first

time in a year, I felt respect for myself. I decided not to be a doormat anymore. I decided to stop moping over a rich girl who had left me. I had had enough of Stephen's and trying to be upper class.

You belong to Dumraon in Bihar. That is who you are, Madhav Jha, I told myself, and that is all you will ever be and need to be.

I called my mother.

'How are the interviews going?' she said.

'One company offered me a job.'

'Who?'

'HSBC.'

'What do they do?'

'Bank.'

'They have a branch in Patna?'

I laughed, 'No, it is an international bank. The job is in Delhi,' I said.

'Oh,' my mother said and her voice dropped. 'You will have to be there then.'

'I said no.'

'What?' she said, surprised.

'I didn't want the job. My heart is not here anymore.'

'Where is your heart?' My mother chuckled.

London, said a voice in my head.

'Dumraon. I'm coming back home.'

I could sense the wide smile on her face through the phone. 'You'll come back to Dumraon? After finishing Stephen's college?' she said, her voice bright.

'Yes. It is my home, after all.'

'Of course. Everyone keeps asking about you: "Where is our prince, the rajkumar?"'

'Please, Ma, I hope all that nonsense won't start there.'

'What do you mean, nonsense? You are the prince of Dumraon. People want to do your raiyabhishek ceremony.'

'Ma. I don't like such traditions. Royalty is dead in India.'

‘It’s just a way they express love. We know, and they know, we don’t have power. But we help keep the community together. You shouldn’t shrug it off’

‘Anyway, I arrive in three weeks. I need to find something to do there.’

‘You can help with the school.’

‘You are running it well.’

‘For how long? Plus, there are so many issues I can’t solve at this age. Should I focus on the teaching or repair the roof? From teachers on one side to labourers on the other, everyone eats my head.’

I laughed.

‘I’ll take care of the roof and any upkeep issues. You run the school.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, Ma.’

‘How much would it have paid you? The job you left?’

‘Let it be, Ma. How does it matter now?’

‘Tell me.’

‘Fifty thousand.’

‘A year?’

‘A month.’

My mother gasped so loudly my eardrum hurt.

‘You really refused that job to come and help in a village school?’

‘Yes, Ma. I told you. I’m booking a ticket on the Magadh Express. See you in three weeks.’

‘I know what made you do this.’

My heart stopped.

‘What?’

‘Your royal blood. You are different. You deserve to be a prince.’

‘Prince has to go. Doesn’t have balance in his prepaid phone.’

My mother laughed as I hung up. Most Indian mothers would slap a child if he left a high-paying job like that. My mother wouldn’t. She knew life involved things greater than money. She had seen the lavish

life. She had also seen her wedding jewels pawned to loan sharks. None of this mattered. What mattered to my mother, the Rani Sahiba of Dumraon, was respect.

‘Beyond a point, people want money to buy respect,’ she would tell me when I was a kid. ‘Respect, however, can’t be bought. You have to earn it.

‘Live with dignity. Live for others, that is how one earns respect,’ she used to say. She was right. Dumraon’s people loved her. Not because she was the Rani Sahiba, but because she was the Rani Sahiba who cared. For the past fifteen years, she had given her all to the Dumraon Royal School in Nandan village, on the outskirts of Dumraon.

I felt homesick. The dusty lanes of Dumraon felt more enticing than the colonial lawns of St. Stephen's. I couldn't wait to be home.

ACT III

New York

'Name?' the officer at the immigration counter said.

'Madhav Jha,' I said, wondering why he didn't just read it on my passport.

'Mr Jha, what is the purpose of your visit to the United States?'

He flipped the pages of my passport, blank except for my new US visa.

To find the love of my life, I wanted to say.

'I'm interning with the Gates Foundation in New York.'

'Documentation, please.'

I took out a plastic folder from my rucksack. It had my internship offer letter, confirming my stipend of three thousand dollars a month I also had certification from Michael's office, the cash advance the foundation had given me and my visa documents.

The immigration officer examined my file.

'Where will you be staying in New York, sir?'

'With friends. On the Upper East Side, 83rd Street and Third Avenue.'

The officer fumbled with my passport for a few seconds. He picked up a stamp.

The 'bam' sounded like a gunshot—to indicate that my race to find Riya had begun.

*

I took a yellow taxi from JFK airport towards Manhattan, the main island that forms the City of New York. It was my first trip outside India and the first thing I noticed was the colour of the sky. It was a crisp, crystal-clear blue; one never sees such a sky in India. I can understand India is dusty, but why is our sky less blue? Or is it the dust in the air that prevents us from seeing it?

The second thing that hit me was the silence. The taxi sped on a road filled with traffic. However, nobody honked, not even at signals. The silence almost made my ears hurt.

Initially, I only saw row houses and brick-coloured warehouses, nothing quite as impressive as I had imagined. However, thirty minutes from the airport, the taxi reached the Brooklyn Bridge, over the Hudson River. One had to cross this bridge to reach Manhattan. The bridge resembled the Howrah Bridge of Kolkata I had seen on TV, only bigger and cleaner. On the other side, a thousand skyscrapers loomed. Literally one tall building after another dotted the entire city. We crossed the bridge and entered Manhattan.

‘Welcome to The Big Apple,’ said the taxi driver in an American accent.

‘Are you from here?’ I said.

‘Now, yes. Originally from Amritsar,’ he said.

I looked at the taxi drivers name: Balwinder Singh. Okay, not quite as exotic as I had imagined.

In Manhattan, I saw people, busy people. Early morning joggers, people going to office in suits, children on their way to school. The city seemed like a maze, with criss-crossing streets and avenues. If one were to get lost here, it would take years to be found again.

‘It’s all arranged in one grid,’ the driver said. ‘You going to Upper East, yeah?’

‘Yes, please,’ I said and handed him the address.

*

‘Madhav Jha. You made it,’ Shailesh squealed in excitement as he opened the door.

I struggled to catch my breath. I had climbed three floors with a backpack and a heavy suitcase.

‘These are pre-war buildings’ Shailesh said. He dragged my suitcase into the apartment. ‘From before the Second World War. You get higher ceilings and more character. However, the lift breaks down every week.’

He took me to the guestroom of his three-bedroom apartment, which looked high-end and was done up in an ethnic Indian style with brass Ganeshas and Madhubani paintings of Krishna. Shailesh had

done an MBA from Harvard after Stephen's. He had joined Goldman Sachs, a top Wall Street investment bank. He shared the apartment with his girlfriend, Jyoti, whom he had met at Harvard. Jyoti worked at Morgan Stanley, another Wall Street investment bank. The size of the apartment told me the banks paid them well. Dark circles under Shailesh's eyes told me they also made him work hard.

'M&A, that's mergers and acquisitions,' Shailesh said, telling me about his work. We sat in his living room. I had reached early, at 6.30 in the morning. Shailesh was ready for work, wearing a grey suit and a dark blue silk tie. He ate breakfast cereal with milk and slipped on his leather loafers.

'Sorry I'm rushing,' Shailesh said. 'Jyoti and I catch the 7 a.m. subway to work. Catch up in the evening, okay?'

'No problem,' I said. 'I need to rest anyway. I'm so tired.'

'Try not to sleep. It will help you adjust to the jet lag,' Shailesh said.

The ten-hour difference in time zones meant my body wanted to sleep while New York City had just woken up.

'Jyoti!' Shailesh shouted.

'Coming,' a female voice in a thick American accent came from one of the bedrooms.

'Shailesh, if you can put me in touch with a real-estate broker...' I started to say.

He interrupted me. 'Are you crazy? You're here for a short while. It's an internship, right?'

'Three months. I can't stay with you that long.'

'Why not? You relax here. I have to go to London tomorrow but we are definitely catching up tonight.' Shailesh finished his breakfast and took the plates to the kitchen sink.

'You've changed so much, Shailesh. We sat in shorts doing adda all day in Stephen's. Now, suits, hi-fi banker life, New York City,' I said. He laughed.

'Times change, lives change. You have to move on, pal.'

I thought about Shailesh's statement. I nodded, even though in half-agreement.

Jyoti, a thin, five-feet-six-inches-tall girl, appeared. She wore a formal black skirt and shirt with a jacket.

'Hi, Madhav. Have heard so much about you,' Jyoti said and extended her hand. She sounded like Samantha, except she had brown skin and black eyes.

"Me too. Sorry to bother you until I find an apartment.'

'Stay as long as you want. Work keeps us so busy. At least someone can use the place,' Jyoti said and turned to Shailesh. 'You ready to go, honey?'

Shailesh nodded.

*

I unpacked my clothes in the guestroom while making plans for the next couple of days; the internship did not start until the day after. I wondered if any live music bars would be open now.

I lay down for five minutes and woke up five hours later, disoriented. Jet lag had made me lose track of time and space. I needed a local SIM card. I checked the dollars in my wallet, picked up the house keys and left.

*

Manhattan has a grid-like structure. Numbered streets run north to south. The wider avenues run from east to west. Shailesh's home on Third Avenue and 83rd Street was close to Central Park, which had its eastern side on Fifth Avenue.

The park, a landmark of the city, is three-and-a-half square kilometres in area and runs all the way from 60th Street in the south to 120th Street up north, and Fifth Avenue on the east to Ninth Avenue on the west.

The park helped me orient myself. Its southern tip had shops where I could buy a SIM card.

I walked west from Third to Fifth Avenue, and then down south twenty-three blocks from 83rd Street to 60th Street. In twenty minutes,

I reached the southeast corner of the park. I found a row of shops, including a store called 'T-Mobile'.

*

The T-Mobile salesperson offered me a SIM card with a 3G data plan, 'If you take a two-year contract, I can also give you a free iPhone.'

'I'm not here that long,' I said.

I agreed to rent a touchscreen phone along with a voice and data plan.

'It'll take twenty minutes to activate,' the salesperson said. I left the shop and walked back north towards Central Park. I had not eaten anything for hours. I scanned the various cafes and delis, each displaying their lunch specials. Most dishes cost close to ten dollars each. A van parked outside Central Park sold bagels, a doughnut shaped bread stuffed with cream cheese or other fillings. It cost only three dollars, including a cold drink.

I got a bagel with cream cheese, tomatoes and onions. A giant-sized Coke came along with it.

I sat on an empty bench outside Central Park and watched tourists walk past. New York City looked beautiful and clean. The first day you spend out of India in a developed country takes a while to sink in. The swanky buildings, the smooth roads, the gleaming shops and the lack of noise (nobody blares horns for some reason) make you feel like you have entered a fairy tale where nothing can ever go wrong. I ate my lunch on the park bench.

A 3G sign on the corner of my phone screen indicated I had network. I typed in my first Google search: 'Live music venues in New York City'.

The Internet worked fine. The search results weren't fine. Literally thousands of places popped up. The first link directed me to the website of Time Out magazine. That site itself had a top-100 list of the best live music venues in the city. In Patna, you would be lucky to find one place that played live music. In Dumraon, the only way you could

hear live music at a bar is if you yourself sang. In New York City, however, there is an endless number of places. I sat on the Central Park bench and examined the tall buildings around me. I felt small and insignificant.

It's a live music venue in one city, how difficult can it be? is what I had told myself before coming here. Now it didn't seem easy at all.

I went to Google Maps. It showed my current location as 59th Street and Sixth Avenue. It also showed me to be a three-kilometre walk away from Shailesh's house. A cold breeze penetrated my Bihar-strength sweater. I crossed my arms and held them close to my chest.

You are so stupid, Madhav, I said to myself as I walked north on Fifth Avenue, along the edge of the park. On a whim, I had packed my bags and come to this cold city. A gust of wind left my face numb.

'I can't do this,' I said.

I took deep breaths. I reminded myself of old basketball matches, which I had won with sheer willpower.

One street, one avenue, one bar at a time, Madhav.

You bagged a Gates Foundation grant. Incredible,’ Jyoti said. We ate chapatis and chana masala for dinner at Shailesh’s house on my first night in New York.

‘My school did. They liked the good work the team had done,’ I said.

‘It’s him,’ Shailesh said. ‘He cracked it. Bill Gates himself saw the school and proposed the grant.’

Jyoti said, ‘Can this internship lead to a full-time job in New York?’

‘I don’t want a job,’ I said.

‘You’re doing it for the experience?’ Shailesh said.

‘It’s for... Well, there is another reason.’ I said and turned silent. I looked at Jyoti.

Shailesh understood my hesitation.

‘You want to tell me later?’ he said.

‘Buddy secrets, is it?’ Jyoti smiled. I smiled back. Jyoti stood up to go to the kitchen.

‘Whatever you tell me, I will end up telling her,’ Shailesh said and looked at her. She blew him a kiss.

‘All right then. Sit, Jyoti,’ I said.

Jyoti sat down again, very attentive.

‘I am here to look for someone,’ I said.

‘Look for?’ Jyoti said. ‘You don’t have his contact?’

‘Her. No, I don’t. I’m not even sure she’s here.’

‘Ah, her. It’s about a girl. Isn’t it always?’ Jyoti said.

‘Who?’ Shailesh said.

‘Riya,’ I said.

‘Riya? Who? Riya Somani?’ Shailesh said.

‘Well, yes,’ I said.

Shailesh let out a whistle.

‘What the fuck,’ Shailesh said. ‘Really? You’re in New York

looking for Riya Somani?’

He started to laugh.

‘Who is Riya Somani? Clearly she has created some excitement here,’ Jyoti said.

‘His...well, how do I say it? Well, kind of your ex-girlfriend, right?’

‘Half-girlfriend, Ex-half-girlfriend,’ I said.

‘That was ages ago,’ Shailesh said, sounding confused. ‘Didn’t she get married to her cousin in London or something? She dropped out, right?’

‘It wasn’t her cousin. It was Rohan, a family friend and rakhi brother. Not a cousin,’

I hate it when college rumours get blown out of proportion.

‘Sorry, I don’t remember the details. She messed with you, man, and flew away to London with her husband,’ Shailesh said.

I smiled.

‘There’s more to that story. A lot more. Want to hear it?’ I said.

Jyoti and Shailesh nodded. They listened with rapt attention.

I told them everything. I ended my story at 10 in the night.

Jyoti turned to Shailesh.

‘I had no idea Indian men could be so romantic,’ she said.

‘What do you mean?’ Shailesh said, looking wounded.

‘You don’t walk me to my office from the subway stop,’ Jyoti said. ‘And here are people coming halfway across the world to find lost love.’

‘C’mon Jyoti. Everything is not an excuse to nag,’ Shailesh said and turned to me. ‘But, boss, you are mind-blowing. Still chasing that chick after, what, seven years?’

‘That’s so romantic,’ Jyoti said dreamily.

‘It’s also stupid,’ Shailesh said.

‘Shailesh!’ Jyoti said.

‘I’m just being protective of my friend.’

‘He’s right,’ I said, interrupting Shailesh. ‘I am being stupid. But I can’t help it, She means everything to me.’

‘Everything? You thought she was dead. You survived, right?’
Shailesh said.

‘Survived, yes, Lived, no.’

Jyoti sighed. Shailesh gave up. He got us a bottle of red wine and three glasses. ‘You guys have to wake up early,’ I said as I took a sip. ‘Feel free to go to bed.’

‘No worries,’ Shailesh said. ‘What is your plan?’

‘I will step out now.’

‘Now?’ Jyoti said, gulping down her wine.

‘I will start with live music venues on the Upper East Side.’

‘This late?’ Jyoti said.

‘Nothing starts before ten anyway,’ I said.

I finished my glass and stood up.

‘It’s New York City. Every block has bars with live music.’ Shailesh said.

‘I’ll have to visit every block, I guess,’ I said.

‘You are mad.’ Shailesh said.

‘Depends on how you look at it,’ I said.

‘Meaning?’

‘You wake up at 6 and put on a suit. You reach office at 7.30 in the morning and work thirteen hours a day. Some may find that pretty mad.’

‘I get rewarded for it, bro. In dollars.’

‘Riya is my ultimate reward,’ I said. Shailesh had no answer.

‘You need a warmer jacket, wait/’ Jyoti said. She rummaged in a cupboard and came back with a leather jacket with a down filling.

‘Thanks,’ I said. I walked out of the apartment and shut the door behind me. Inside, I could hear Shailesh say, ‘You think he needs a psychiatrist?’

*

Google Maps doesn’t judge lunatic lovers. It simply gave me results when I looked for live music bars near me. The first suggestion was Brandy’s Piano Bar on 84th Street, between Second and Third

Avenue, a mere five-minute walk away.

I reached Brandy's, a tiny bar one would miss if one wasn't looking for it. A two-drink minimum policy applied to all customers. I didn't want to have drinks. I just wanted to meet the management and find out the list of singers.

'Sir, you need to order two drinks,' the waitress told me, chewing gum. I realized I would need a better way to do this. For now, I found the cheapest drink on the menu.

'Two Budweiser beers, please.'

A makeshift stage had a piano on it. I had entered during a break. Ten minutes later, a singer called Matt came and took his seat.

'Hi guys, lovely to see you all again, let's start with Aerosmith,' Matt said.

The crowd broke into cheers. I guessed Aerosmith was a popular band. Matt sang in a slow, clear voice. My English practice meant I could catch a few words; *'I could stay awake just to hear you breathing. Watch you smile while you are sleeping.'*

Customers swung their heads from side to side. Matt sang and played the piano at the same time. *'Don't wanna close my eyes, I don't wanna fall asleep. 'Cause I'd miss you, baby. And I don't wanna miss a thing'*

I didn't want to fall asleep either. I wanted to stay up all night and look for Riya in as many bars as I could. I opened my Google Maps app again. The streets of Manhattan seemed manageable on the phone screen. In reality, this was a megacity of millions.

She may not even be in New York, a soft voice in my head told me. It was the only sensible voice I had left. As always, I ignored it. I focused on the music. I felt the pain of the singer who couldn't bear to sleep as it would mean missing moments with his lover.

I went up to the cashier and asked for the manager. When he arrived, I posed my standard list of questions.

'I've come from India looking for a lost friend. All I know is she is probably a singer at a bar in New York. Can you tell me who your

singers are?’

‘Too many, my friend. The schedule is on the noticeboard. You know her name?’ the manager said.

‘Her real name is Riya.’

‘No such name, I’m pretty sure.’

‘She may have changed it for the stage,’ I said.

‘That’s a tough search then, my friend.’

‘She’s tall, slim and pretty. Long hair, well, at least when I saw her last.’

‘This is a city of tall, slim and pretty people.’

‘Indian, She’s an Indian singer in a New York bar.’

‘She sings Bollywood? I would check the Indian restaurants.’

‘Unlikely. She liked Western music. Do you remember seeing any Indian singer at your bar?’

The manager thought for a few seconds. He shook his head.

‘Sorry, mate. The schedule is there. See if something rings a bell.’

I walked to the noticeboard. I saw the timetable for various gigs all month, The singers’ descriptions did not suggest anyone like Riya.

The waitress gave me the bill for two beers. She added a 20 per cent tip to it.

‘20 per cent?’

‘It’s New York,’ she said, glaring. I later learnt that tipping wasn’t optional in New York.

I left Brandy’s and visited a couple of other bars in the neighbourhood. There was Marty O’Brien’s on 87th street in Second Avenue. It had more rock bands than singers. Uptown Restaurant and Lounge on 88th Street had its schedule placed outside. I could only find two female singers. Both were American, the doorman told me. The posh Carlyle Hotel, all the way down on 76th Street, had a bar called Bemelman’s. Drinks cost fifteen dollars each, excluding the tip. I sat on a small couch in the corner of the bar and stayed away from the waiter to avoid placing an order.

The singer, a beautiful, six-foot-tall blonde American woman, sang

a love song: *'I have loved you for a thousand years, I will love you for a thousand more.'*

A waiter came up to me to take my order. I told him I had to leave for some urgent work. I stood up.

'By the way, do you have other female singers here?' I said.

'A couple of them. They alternate.'

'Anybody who looks Indian?'

'I couldn't tell, sir,' the waiter said. Americans don't like to take a shot at answering questions they don't know—unlike Indians, who pretty much know everything about everything.

'Tall, really pretty girl who looks Indian?'

'No, sir. Only two black singers, and two Caucasian ones.'

Even at midnight, on a weekday, the place was packed. Everyone around me seemed incredibly happy. They clinked glasses and laughed at jokes. They probably didn't know of Bihar's existence. Neither would they know how it felt to love someone for a thousand years, as the singer crooned.

I did.

The Gates Foundation's head office in the United States is in Seattle. It is where Microsoft is based and where Bill Gates lives. Apart from that, they have an East Coast office in Washington. In New York, they often work with their partners on various projects. Since I had insisted on New York, Michael had given me a place on a Foundation project with the United Nations. The UN world headquarters is located in mid-town New York. On my first day to work, I walked to the 86th Street station on Lexington Avenue. I took train number four and got down at Grand Central Station on 42nd Street, walking half a mile to the massive United Nations Plaza complex. After a three-layered security process, I reached the office of the UNFPA, or the United Nations Population Fund.

'Mr Jha, welcome. Come in.' A forty-year-old black man twice my width met me in the reception area.

I entered an office filled with books and reports.

'Olara Lokeris from Uganda. Worked with the Population Fund for ten years. I will be your mentor.'

The Gates Foundation had granted 57 million US dollars to the UNFPA to educate youth on preventing HIV/AIDS in African countries. I had to make a report on the project's progress. Of course, I had no experience either in Africa, or in making a report.

'I run a school in Bihar, India. I'm sorry, but this Africa and HIV research is all new to me.'

Olara smiled. His white teeth glistened in his large face.

'Don't worry. Making reports is much easier than running an actual school,' he said.

Olara spent the rest of the afternoon explaining the various databases maintained in the project to me.

'Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania and Botswana are the four main countries of focus,' he said.

He briefed me on other logistical and administrative issues related

to my internship. He also told me that work hours would be from 9 to 5, with a lunch break in between.

‘First time in New York?’ Olara said.

‘Yes.’

‘Good, I will take you out for a drink after work.’ : ‘Sure,’ I said.

‘Any preferences?’

‘Any place with live music,’ I said.

*

One month later

‘Dude, no. Please. I can’t take this,’ Shailesh said. He pushed the envelope back towards me.

I had placed a thousand dollars inside.

‘It’s been a month, Shailesh. I feel obligated,’ I said.

‘Would I pay you rent if I came to Dumraon?’ he said.

‘No, but you are paying rent here. So let me contribute.’

‘Don’t be stupid. You are hardly here. You come home at 3 every night. You leave at 8. We barely feel your presence.’

Shailesh was right. We had not met the entire week, even though we lived in the same house.

‘How’s work?’ he said. ‘What exactly is your project?’

‘Tracking the progress of AIDS awareness initiatives in Botswana.’

‘Sounds noble.’

‘I don’t know about noble. All I know is I only have two months left and there’s still no sign of Riya.’

Shailesh tilted his box of cereal. The box label said ‘Cinnamon Toast Crunch’. Little sugar-coated squares fell into his milk.

‘You are chasing an illusion,’ he said.

‘Maybe.’

‘How many bars have you visited in the last month?’

I flipped through my notebook where I kept track of all my visits.

‘Hundred-plus. Close to two hundred,’ I said.

Apart from actual visits, I had also called up five hundred other music venues. Nobody had heard of a singer called Riya.

Shailesh gasped. He covered his mouth with his hand to prevent food from spilling out. He waited a few seconds to chew the contents in his mouth before he spoke again.

‘Madhav, I love you as a friend so I am saying it. You have to stop this. She is gone. Wish her happiness. Move on.’

‘I will. But only after I feel that I’ve tried my best. Two more months.’

‘I would say end it now. And why go back in two months? Is there a chance of a full-time assignment with the UN?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve never really showed an interest.’

‘Stop living in the past. Make a new life. Look for work here and meet other people.’

I smiled and nodded, He made sense. I was not interested in sense. He finished his breakfast, Slipping on his shoes, he said, ‘Come out with us sometime, Jyoti has many lovely single friends.’

‘Sure. Let me know if you’re going to a live music venue.’ Shailesh looked at me and laughed, ‘Mad you are,’ he said. ‘Anyway, I better leave or I’ll miss my train,’

*

I had a one-hour lunch break at the UN. Most days I ate a sandwich from the Subway or Starbucks outside. Since Shailesh had refused to take rent, I had enough money to even have a cappuccino later. I had found a fixed corner seat at Starbucks from which to make my calls.

‘Hi, is this the West Village Talenthouse?’ I said,

‘Yes, it is,’ an older lady with a heavy American accent said, ‘Can I speak to the manager?’

‘May I ask what this is about?’

‘I’m looking for a singer.’

‘We have lots of them. Did you check our website?’

‘Yes, I did. However, I am looking for someone specific not listed there.’

‘Didn’t get you, honey,’

‘Well, it's a girl, Indian-origin. She is in her early twenties. Her real name is Riya. I don't think she uses that on stage.’

‘I can't help you with such limited information. Did you see her perform somewhere?’

‘Well, no. Actually, she is an old friend. I am trying to locate her,’

‘Sorry, getting another call, bye.’

She hung up. I had another sip from my Venti-sized cup, which held over half-a-litre of coffee. Americans are into size, whether it is their cars, bodies or food. I had ten minutes of lunch break left. I called a few more bars and one more talent agency. Finally, I made a route plan to visit six bars in the evening around the Tribeca area.

'No Indian singer here. I'm sorry,' she said.

I had come to Tribeca Nation, a small bar with thirty seats and a tiny stage for solo vocalists. The singer had just finished her performance.

I had gone up to her and told her I loved her voice. I asked her if she would have a few minutes to sit with me. She looked at me suspiciously.

'I just have some questions. Nothing else,' I had told her.

She ordered a Jack Daniel's whisky and Diet Coke, and urged me to try the same.

Erica was twenty-two years old. She was from Rhode Island, a state north of New York. She wanted to act in a Broadway play, and tried her luck at auditions during the day. At night, she earned a living through singing gigs.

'I finished high school and came here.'

I looked at her.

'No college, sorry.' She grinned. Over the past few weeks, I had learnt a thing or two about Americans. If they wanted something, they went for it. They didn't think about the risks so much. Which Indian parent would allow a girl to sing in bars at night after class XII, I wondered?

'I really need to find this girl,' I said, now two whiskies down and more talkative.

'Love. Makes us do crazy things,' she said.

'Well, I am going a little crazy.'

'Love.' She laughed. 'At least it keeps us singers in business.'

I gave her Riya's description.

'You spoke to agents?'

'As many as I could. No luck yet.'

'If she has a stage name, it can get quite difficult.'

'Well, she is Indian. I am hoping someone will remember her. I

have two months left.'

'I'll let you know in case I spot someone.'

'That would be helpful.'

'I don't have your number.'

We shared contacts. She recommended other bars.

'Here,' she passed me a tissue she had scribbled names on. 'These are places that give new singers a chance.'

'Thanks,' I said.

'She's a lucky girl,' Erica said.

'It's me who needs some luck now,' I said.

*

One and a half months later

'See you at Pylos then. At 7th Street and First Avenue. Eight o'clock.' Shailesh ended the call.

Pylos is a high-end Greek restaurant located in the East Village. Earthen terracotta pots with spotlights dangled from the ceiling. In Bihar, nobody would think that the humble matki could play chandelier.

Shailesh and Jyoti had invited me out to dinner. Jyoti had brought her friend Priya along, without warning me.

'Priya is a journalist with Al Jazeera in New York. We went to high school together,' Jyoti said. Priya looked like she was in her early twenties. Fashionable glasses, slim figure, attractive. She wore a navy-blue top with a white pencil skirt and a long silver chain that dangled down till her navel, which was visible when she stretched.

'This is Madhav. He's here on a United Nations project,' Shailesh said. Cue for Priya and me to shake hands and smile.

I told her about my internship and what I did back home in India.

'You run a rural Indian school? That is so cool,' she said.

'Thanks,' I said.

We ordered a bottle of Greek wine. We also asked for motissaka, which is sauteed eggplant and tomato layered with caramelised onions, herbs and a cheese sauce. A mountain-shaped dish, piled with

vegetables, arrived on our table.

I ate a spoonful.

‘This is like chokha,’ I said.

‘Chokha?’ Priya said.

‘It’s a popular dish in Bihar. Which part of India are you from?’

‘I’m from Minnesota,’ she said. I realized that NRIs born in the US did not like being referred to as Indians.

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘Anyway. This is similar to a local dish we have.’

‘My parents are from Andhra Pradesh,’ she said.

Shailesh refilled my glass of wine.

Jyoti ordered more food. We had a trio of Greek dips, consisting of tzatziki, a thick yogurt dip; taramosalata, a dip made of fish eggs; and melitzanosalata, made with char-grilled eggplants and extra-virgin Greek olive oil. It came with pita bread.

‘I’m sorry, but this bread is also like our chapati,’ I said.

‘Yes, indeed. These are all flatbreads. From Greece and Turkey to the Middle East and all the way down to South Asia, flatbreads are popular,’ Priya said.

‘Is she Wikipedia?’ Shailesh asked Jyoti and we all laughed.

‘She is. Just be happy she’s not discussing the Greek economic crisis because you came to a Greek place,’ Jyoti said.

‘Oh no, please. I read enough economic reports in the bank,’ Shailesh said.

‘Hey, I’m a nerd and a proud one. Cheers.’ Priya raised her glass. All of us lifted ours.

‘Don’t worry, UN boy, I won’t bore you with my little nuggets of wisdom anymore,’ Priya said. She clinked her glass against mine.

The girls decided to make a trip to the ladies’ room together. Why do they go together for a solo activity?

‘Like her?’ Shailesh said, after the girls had left.

‘Huh?’

‘Priya. She’s giving you the eye, dude. Isn’t she hot?’

‘What?’ I said.

‘You play your cards right and she can be yours.’

I shook my head.

‘I’m not kidding,’ Shailesh said.

‘Not interested.’

‘I’m not asking you to marry her. Take her out, have fun. Loosen up.’

‘Very funny, I hardly have any time left in New York, Only two more weeks,’

‘All the more reason, Don’t go back without some romance. Or a score,’ He winked at me.

‘I have a final report to finish, I haven’t even started to pack. Plus, so many bars to go to,’

‘You won’t give up on this Riya nonsense?’

I kept quiet and finished my third glass of wine,

‘You’ve visited or called over a thousand places,’ Shailesh said, ‘In two weeks it all ends anyway. I am tired, too. Just giving it my best shot,’

‘Idiot you are,’ Shailesh said,

We heard giggles as the girls returned.

‘My friend here thinks you’re a little serious. But hot in a brooding sort of way,’ Jyoti announced, Priya smacked Jyoti’s arm, ‘Shut up. You can’t repeat a private conversation,’ said Priya, blushing as she sat down again, Shailesh kicked my leg. Act, buddy, he seemed to say.

The waiter brought us another bottle of wine. I poured my fourth glass, ‘For dessert I would recommend a drained Greek yogurt served with fresh cherries, thyme-scented Greek honey and walnuts,’ the waiter said. The girls swooned over the description and ordered two servings.

‘Where are we going next?’ Priya said.

Well, we are the boring banker couple. We have early morning calls,’ Shailesh said. ‘So we will head home. Why don’t Madhav and you check out other places in the neighbourhood?’

‘Sure, I don’t mind. I could show Madhav the East Village area

around Pylos. I used to live here earlier,’

‘Actually, I have other places to go to,’ I said. I did have five places on my list tonight.

‘Madhav, the lady wants to go out,’ Shailesh said. He kicked me again under the table.

‘Stop kicking me,’ I said. The wine had made me more confident. Jyoti looked startled by the sudden rise in my voice.

‘I need to go. Thanks for dinner. What is my share?’ I stood up. My head felt heavy. I had drunk too much.

‘Sit down, Madhav. We are trying to help you,’ Shailesh said.

‘What am I? A fucking patient who needs help?’

My wine glass slipped from my hand and fell on the floor. There was shattered glass all over the floor.

‘You do need help, Madhav. You’re losing the plot,’ Shailesh said.

Customers at other tables were looking at us. A waiter came to remove the broken glass.

‘We should go. Shailesh, did you pay the bill?’ Jyoti said.

‘Did I say something wrong?’ Priya said.

‘No,’ Jyoti said to Priya.

‘So what just happened?’ Priya said.

‘The boys go back a long way. They have their way of talking. Don’t worry about it.’

Shailesh took hold of my upper arm. He dragged me out of the restaurant. The cold December breeze hit us all.

‘You are drunk,’ Shailesh said in a slow, deliberately calm voice. ‘Let’s take a cab home. We will drop Priya on the way.’

‘I am not drunk,’ I said, even though I found it hard to keep my balance on the icy street.

‘You drank wine like water,’ Shailesh said.

A yellow cab stopped next to us. The girls got in. Shailesh shoved me into the front seat. He sat behind with the girls.

‘83rd and Third please, with a stop at 37th first,’ Jyoti said.

I opened the front door of the car.

‘I have to visit five bars,’ I said and stepped out.

Priya looked at Jyoti, confused.

‘You are drunk. Come back in so we can leave. It’s cold outside,’ Shailesh said, in a firm but annoyed voice.

‘I am not drunk,’ I screamed, stumbling on the road and falling on all fours. I twisted my right ankle and it hurt like hell.

‘Can you cut the drama and come back in?’ Shailesh said.

The girls saw me wince and were about to step out when Shailesh stopped them.

‘Are you coming or not? I’m running out of patience, bro,’ he said.

‘I have to visit five bars,’ I said again, still wincing from the pain of the fall.

‘Chutiya,’ Shailesh said. He slammed the door shut and the cab zoomed off. A few cold drops fell on my face. I looked up at the sky. Little white snowflakes were falling everywhere. A homeless man offered a hand to help me stand up. Only the most pathetic can help the most pathetic.

‘I have to visit five bars,’ I told the homeless man.

'I'm so ashamed, I can't even look at you guys,' I said, eyes down.

I sat at the dining table in Shailesh's house. I had brought muffins, bagels, cream cheese, fresh orange juice, takeaway coffee and fruit from Dean and Deluca, a neighbourhood deli.

Shailesh did not respond,

'When did you come back? And when did you get so much food?' Jyoti said.

'I came back at 6. I tried to sleep but the guilt wouldn't let me. So I went out and got breakfast.'

Jyoti said, 'You need not have bothered. We were so worried about you last night.'

'No, we weren't,' Shailesh cut Jyoti off.

I said to her, 'Sorry, Jyoti. I behaved like an ass in front of your friend. I embarrassed you guys. Luckily, I will be gone soon.'

Shailesh didn't say anything. He just stared at me without a word. 'Shailesh, I'm sorry. I had too much wine. I didn't know Greek wine was so potent,'

'That's not the point, Madhav. We all get high and have fun. You disrespected us. Priya felt horrible. You ruined a special evening,'

'I'm sorry. You are right.'

'Did you see yourself? Staggering on the road screaming "five more bars". What has happened to you?'

'It's sinking in finally. I might never meet Riya again. It is the realization that my effort was a waste. It got to me yesterday.'

'You are still visiting places. Five bars, five bars, you kept saying. What the fuck, Madhav?'

'I never went. I couldn't. I passed out.'

'How did you get home?' Jyoti said.

'I woke up shivering near a bus stop. Took a cab and came home.'

Jyoti and Shailesh looked at each other.

'You might be right, Shailesh. I may need a psychiatrist,' I said.

Shailesh gave me a sarcastic smile.

Jyoti took the cream cheese and applied it on three bagels. I took a sip of black coffee.

‘Anyway, guys, I’m sorry I lost control. I hurt you guys, after all you have done for me. Enough is enough. No more visiting live music venues.’

‘Really? Promise?’ Shailesh took a bite of his bagel.

‘Yes. I want to finish my final report. I want to see a bit more of New York, even though it’s snowing and cold. More than anything, I want to spend my remaining free time with you both, because who knows when we will meet again.’

Jyoti smiled. She looked at Shailesh, gesturing for him to forgive me.

‘And if Priya is brave enough to meet me once more, I will apologize to her, too.’

Shailesh stood up. He came around to give me a bear hug.

‘Is it okay? Say something,’ I said to him.

‘Idiot you are, what else to say?’ Shailesh smiled.

Bye, Riya Somoni, I said in my head.

*

‘What size? Speak louder, I can’t hear you,’ I said to my mother over the phone.

I had come to a store called Century 21 to buy gifts for people back home.

‘Take large size, and get me a cardigan with buttons,’ she said.

I had brought candies for the entire school. It was not the smartest idea. I now needed a new suitcase just to carry the treats.

‘Cardigan is done. Do you need anything else?’

‘I need some bras. I heard you get good ones there.’

‘Bye, Ma.’

*

One week before the internship ended, I handed over my final report to Olara.

‘Thank you, Madhav. I look forward to reading your work,’ he said.

‘Thanks, Olara. You’ve been a great guide these past few month...’

‘Well, you are a bright man. Did you finally apply for a permanent position?’

‘I leave for India next Sunday.’

Olara smiled and patted my back.

I returned to my desk. My phone had a missed call from a contact I had saved as ‘Erica, Tribeca Nation singer’.

I called her back.

‘Hi,’ I said as she picked up the call.

‘Hi. Mad-dav, right?’ she said.

‘Yes, the Indian guy you met at Tribeca Nation.’

‘How are you? You were looking for someone, right?’

Warmth tingled through me. I told myself to calm down. I had promised Shailesh I’d quit.

‘Yes. I was.’

‘Any luck?’

‘Nope,’ I said.

‘Okay, so I don’t have much. This will confuse you even more. But there could be a new tall Indian girl who sings.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I overheard.’

‘Who from?’

‘Customers at the bar. They spoke about this good-looking singer and were trying to guess her nationality. Indian features, but quite fair-complexioned, that’s what they said. So it reminded me of you.’

‘And? What else did they say?’

‘They said she sang quite well. Jazz, a bit of rock...’

‘What? No, I mean where? Where did they hear her? Did you ask them?’

‘Well, yes. They said at the Union Square Farmer’s Market on 14th Street.’

‘Is it a bar?’

‘No, a farmer’s market is like a street fair. They have organic food stalls, and a couple of random gigs sometimes.’

‘So what do I do?’

‘I don’t know. Sorry, they didn’t know more.’

‘Will the fair organizers know?’

‘I doubt it. Its too huge a place. You call check. Take train number four to Union Square.’

‘Okay,’ I said.

‘Sorry, Mad-dav. I said I would confuse you. But that day you said you don’t even know if she is here. Well, she might be.’

‘Thanks, Erica.’

Of course, my visit to Union Square proved useless. I didn't have a date or the exact location of the stall.

The farmer's market is put up in the Union Square quadrangle, a football-field sized area filled with over a hundred natural and environment-friendly product stalls. A few stalls featured performances ranging from juggling to music gigs. I passed organic honey and fruit-based soap counters to reach the fair office.

'Agents book the stalls. Then they call their own musicians on hire. It's quite impossible for us to trace them,' a lady at the fair office told me.

I took the subway back home. I felt stupid. I had wasted an evening I could have spent with my friends. I reached the 86th Street stop. I walked out to find the streets filled with snow. It was cold and dark. Still, under the city lights, New York, with its historic skyscrapers and modern neon lights, looked pretty. As I walked home, I passed restaurants with cosy interiors. Beautiful people chatted and laughed as they ate their dinner. I wondered if I would ever, even for one day in my life, be carefree like them.

*

On my last Saturday in New York, I decided to visit the tourist attractions. I spent my morning visiting the Rockefeller Center, the Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty. In the afternoon, I decided to splurge. I went to watch an NBA game.

'One ticket for the Knicks game, please,' I said at the ticket counter. Madison Square Garden, also known as the MSG or simply the Garden, is a multi-purpose indoor arena in midtown Manhattan in New York City. Located between Seventh and Eighth Avenues from 31st to 33rd Streets, it is situated atop Pennsylvania Station. I had come to the Garden to watch a play-off game between the New York Knicks and LA Lakers.

The Garden cost nearly a billion dollars to construct, making it one

of the most expensive stadiums in the world. I went inside, and was astonished by what I saw. It was the best basketball court and spectator stadium I had ever seen in my life.

The teams had towering players, many of them over six-and-a-half feet tall. The Lakers wore yellow kits with a purple strip down the side. The Knicks had on blue jerseys with an orange border.

I took my seat. It took me a minute to scan the huge arena and figure out all the complicated scoreboards. The crowd of nearly twenty thousand roared at every point scored.

I was in New York. However, I supported the LA Lakers. They had Kobe Bryant, one of the world's best basketball players and my favourite. He scored the most, over forty points in the game. I wondered if an Indian player would ever join the NBA.

The game ended with the Lakers scoring an easy win. The crowd, exhilarated from the game and the atmosphere, began to trickle out of the stadium. I followed them to the exit.

*

As I came out of the MSG, I saw a couple of elderly people in jackets with the New York City Tourism logo, waiting near the exit. An elderly Hispanic woman walked slowly towards me.

'Tourist?' she said.

'Yes, well, sort of,' I said.

'How your trip goes? Me Daisy, from the Senior Citizens for NYC tourism. Sorry my English not good. I am Mexico originally.'

'My trip is going quite well, thank you,' I said. 'And your English is just fine.'

I could not believe I had commented on someone else's English. She held a bunch of brochures in her hand.

'May I ask the favour? Will you practise English me five minutes?' Daisy said.

I had to go home and pack. This was an unusual request anyway.

'I join adult school to learn English. To practise I volunteer here tourism department,' Daisy persisted.

‘I actually have to go home.’

The older man with her took me aside.

‘Hi, I am Doug, a supervisor for the senior citizens for NYC volunteer programme.’

I shook hands with him.

‘Please spare five minutes for her. She lives alone. She needs to practise her English,’ Doug said.

‘Sir, my English is not so good. I am from India.’

‘Indians speak good English.’

‘Not all. I am also learning it.’

‘You are speaking good English now.’

‘Well, thank you, sir.’

‘Someone must have taught you.’

I sighed.

‘Five minutes,’ Doug said.

I nodded.

Doug left me with Daisy.

‘Hello, Madam Daisy. What would you like to talk about?’

‘Would you like brochure? To see attractions of weekend?’

‘Actually, I don’t think so. I leave soon...’ I said but she interrupted me.

‘They free. Have look. We have discounted Broadway shows, a food festival, a jazz and music fest...’

‘I will correct you. Please say, “they are free, have a look”,’ I said.

‘Sorry, sorry. That I say.’

‘I leave Monday. So I am afraid I won’t be able to do much,’ I said.

She looked disappointed. I figured she had to do her tourism job, too. She possibly had a quota of people she needed to distribute brochures to every day.

‘Fine, I’ll take them. Thank you.’

‘Oh, thank you,’ she said and cheered up again. ‘You fill small survey for me. Two minutes.’

I put the brochures in my jacket pocket. She gave me a form

asking basic details about my visit and myself, ‘Can I leave now, madam?’ I said, as politely as possible.

‘Enjoy rest of stay,’ she said and waved me goodbye.

‘Yes, yes. Thank you.’

I left the MSG compound and came to the street. Peak hours meant cabs would be stuck in traffic forever. I checked the time. It was 7 p.m. I decided to walk the four-kilometre distance from Madison Square Garden to Shailesh’s house.

'Surprise!'

A crowd of people screamed as I entered Shailesh's house. Jyoti had arranged an unexpected farewell party for me.

'Wow,' I said as I entered the apartment. I found twenty guests, Shailesh and Jyoti's friends, waiting for me.

'Hey, Priya, good to see you,' I said, wondering if she would slap me.

'Hi,' she said.

'I'm really sorry about that night.'

'Just go easy on the wine,' she said and laughed. I smiled back at her. She was really attractive. Many men at the party had their eyes on her.

A black man came up to me.

'Olara,' I said and hugged him.

'Your friends are damn nice. They dug out my number and invited me.'

'I'm so glad you came.'

Jyoti dragged me away from Olara to give a short speech.

'I want to thank Shailesh and Jyoti, who hosted me, and treated me like family,' I said.

'Cut it out, let's party,' Shailesh interrupted me. He offered everyone tequila shots and turned up the volume of the music player. Conversations required people to shout. Male bankers huddled together to discuss expected bonuses. The girls made another group. They discussed the best value offers in town, whether on Netflix or Sunday brunch deals in Manhattan. I chatted with a few people.

'Gates Foundation. They are like huge, man,' one banker said to me.

'I just run a small school they fund,' I said.

'I need a Gates Foundation grant. Do they fund bankers who need an apartment in Manhattan?' said another. Everyone laughed.

I spoke to many of those present, but felt little connection with any of them. I stepped away from the crowd and sat on the sofa. I took out my phone to look at the pictures I had taken during the day. I had taken some inside MSG.

‘You watched a Knicks game?’ I heard Priya’s voice from behind me.

I turned to look at her.

‘Yes, I went today.’

‘Nice pictures. Can I see?’

She sat down next to me. I flipped through the photos.

My phone vibrated. A message from ‘Erica, Tribeca Nation singer’.

‘Checking out the Jazz and Music Fest?’ the message flashed as a notification and disappeared. The phone screen went back to displaying pictures again, ‘Next?’ Priya said as I didn’t touch my phone for a minute, ‘Priya, just a second. I need to send a reply,’

‘Oh, sure, I will get a drink, Not for you, though,’ she smiled, wagging a finger at me, I smiled back, I composed a message for Erica: *I leave Monday. Almost packed. At my farewell party now. Thanks anyway. :)* She replied: *Fly safe. Ciao. :)* I looked up. I saw Priya engrossed in conversation with someone at the bar.

I shut my phone and placed it in my jacket pocket. I then realized that I was still carrying the brochures Daisy, the old lady, had given me outside Madison Square Garden. I read them one by one.

‘CATS—the longest running Broadway musical,’ said the first.

‘Blue Man Comedy Show—combining music, technology and comedy,’ said another.

One of the brochures was a sixteen-page thick, A5-sized booklet. It said ‘New York Music and Jazz Festival Weekend’.

The room lights had been dimmed, making it difficult for me to read the text. I shifted my seat closer to a candle on the coffee table. ‘123 performers. 25 venues. 3 days. 1 city,’ it said on the booklet cover.

The booklet opened with a two-page spread of the schedule of performances. It was arranged in three tables, one each for Friday,

Saturday and Sunday. Each table had rows for the various time slots. The columns had the names of the singer, the venue and the kind of music and ticket prices. The next two pages had details of each venue. The remaining pages had a brief description of each singer, over a hundred of them. I read the first one: *Abigail—Grew up in Boston, degree in jazz music. Started out as a gospel singer. After singing in Boston for two years, she moved to New York. Boston Globe called her voice 'smooth velvet' that can 'calm your soul'.*

I went through the names, mostly to pass time. I didn't really belong in my own party.

I skimmed through all the descriptions in the alphabetical list. I ignored all the male singers. Twenty minutes later, I reached the letter R.

Ray - A 'sparkling new voice on the NY scene' according to the Village Voice, Ray would rather talk about 'where she is going' than 'where she comes from. This tall exotic beauty 'sings as good as she looks ' according to the Daily News.

I stopped at Ray's description. I read it thrice. I flipped back to the schedule to see Ray's line-up. I looked under Saturday, which was today. My index finger ran down the schedule page.

'Blues, Soul and Contemporary, 10.00 p.m.-12.00 a.m. Stephanie, Roger and Ray, Cafe Wha?, \$8 entry, two drinks minimum,'

I turned the page to look up the details of Cafe Wha? and strained hard to read the tiny print.

Cafe Wha? An old classic New York bar where many legends have performed in their struggling days. Mexican and American food options. 115 MacDougal Street, West Village. Subway 4, 5, 6. Bleecker Street F, West 4th Street.

'What are you doing, bro?' Shailesh squeezed my shoulder hard.

'Huh?' I said, startled.

'It's your party. What the hell are you reading?'

I put the brochure aside and smiled.

'Nothing. Just some touristy stuff,' I said.

‘You’re not drinking?’ he said. He tapped his thigh in time with the music.

‘No. You know me and alcohol.’

‘I can handle you at home. Wait, let me get a drink for you.’

Shailesh went to the bar. I checked the time on my phone. It said 11.05 p.m.

I googled Cafe Wha?’s number and called them.

They took thirty seconds to pick up. It seemed like an hour.

‘Hello. Cafe Wha?’ I heard a cheerful male voice, barely audible due to the music in the background.

‘Hi, I am interested in the Music and Jazz Fest performance tonight.’

‘Yes, it’s on now, sir. It’s an eight-dollar cover charge. Two drinks minimum,’ the person on the other side recited his rehearsed stuff.

‘I wanted to know if there is a singer called Ray performing tonight?’

‘Well, let me see. Yes, we have three singers. Hers is the last act. Should be on any time now. Sir, I need to hang up. It’s really busy here tonight, and I am one of the very few servers.’

‘Sorry, just one question. Is she there? Can you see her?’

‘Huh?’ the server said, confused. ‘Well, I do see the singers near the stage. I think she is there.’

‘What does she look like?’

‘Sorry, sir, I hate to be rude but you want me to take your name down for reservations or something? Can’t help you with much else.’

‘Yes, just one last thing. Does she look Indian? It’s really important. Please.’

‘Hold on,’ the server said.

Shailesh came up to me as I was on hold. He gave me a glass of champagne. I gestured a thanks to him. He gave me a puzzled look, wondering who I was calling at this time.

The wait seemed endless.

‘Nothing, it is the travel agency who booked my return tickets,’ I

whispered to Shailesh, making up whatever I could on the spot.

‘This late?’ he said, surprised. I shrugged and excused myself to step aside.

‘Sir? You there?’ The man was back.

‘Yes, yes. I am.’

‘She’s definitely not Caucasian white. She isn’t black either. She could be Indian. Or I don’t know, she’s quite light-coloured, so maybe Spanish or mixed-race. Sorry, I can’t...’

I interrupted him.

‘Thanks. That’s enough. I’m coming down. Can you hold a place for one? I’m Madhav’

Maad-what?’

‘Just put me down as M. I’m coming.’

‘You better be here soon. The acts end at midnight.’

Shailesh stood right in front of me.

‘All okay with your ticket?’ he said.

‘Yeah. It’s fine,’ I said and paused before I spoke again. ‘Shailesh, I need to get out,’

‘Wha...?’

‘Exactly,’ I said, ‘That’s where I need to go.’

‘Where?’

‘I need to get some fresh air.’

‘Have you seen the snow outside? Where are you going?’

He pointed to his balcony. Blobs of snow covered the ledge.

Outside his apartment, a steady stream of snowflakes shot down from the night sky.

‘I have a jacket,’ I said.

Shailesh looked bewildered by my sudden desire for a night stroll.

‘Madhav, what do I tell the guests?’ he said.

‘They will barely notice,’ I said and left.

I stepped out of the apartment building. Cold winds slashed at my face. My phone showed the time as 11.12 p.m. and a temperature of 20 degrees Fahrenheit, or -6.6 degrees Celsius. People were all bundled up in gloves, caps and jackets, i saw a group of four friends walk towards the 86th Street subway ahead of me.

Fresh snow had made the pavements powdery and white. The group of four and i reached the subway stop. We took the steps down to the metro. Some African-Americans were coming up the steps.

‘It’s not coming, woo hoo, no train tonight...’ said one of them in a drunk voice.

‘How am I going to get my ass to Brooklyn?’ his friend said.

‘A hundred-dollar cab ride, baby. That ass deserves it,’ another friend said. They all laughed.

I reached the customer services counter. A plump African-American lady from the Metropolitan Transit Authority, or MTA, sat inside. She made an announcement into a microphone.

‘Ladies and gentleman, due to heavy snow, we are experiencing huge delays on all lines. A train is stalled in the network near Grand Central. We are trying to remedy the problem. We suggest alternative travel arrangements.’

I checked the station clock: 11.19 p.m.

Google Maps suggested the subway would have taken me to Bleecker Street in seventeen minutes. From there, it was a nine-minute walk to the cafe.

‘How much delay?’ I asked the customer service officer.

‘Who knows, honey,’ she said. ‘It’s snow. Half an hour, an hour, two hours. Take your pick.’

I ran up the steps and came out of the station. Cold air sneaked in under the jacket’s collar and down my neck. The road had little traffic. I waited but no empty cab went past.

I asked a passer-by, ‘I need to go to the West Village urgently.

Where can I get a cab?’

‘Want one myself.’

I checked the time: 11.25 p.m.

‘Walk west to Fifth Avenue. You will hit Central Park. Try there,’ someone said.

I took rapid strides to Fifth Avenue. I reached the periphery of Central Park, near the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Amber lights lit up the museum building. The falling snowflakes created a soft-focus effect.

Time: 11.31 p.m.

If I didn’t get a cab, I would not be able to reach West Village before midnight. I couldn’t see any cabs. I looked up at the sky to pray. Snowflakes fell on my face.

God, please, please, I said.

I looked around me. At least six more people waited for cabs. My heart sank. I wanted to cry.

One cab, please, I said, waiting for magic to happen.

No cabs.

Time: 11.34 p.m.

I reopened Google Maps. I checked the distance from my current location at the Met Museum to Cafe Wha? and chose the pedestrian option.

It displayed this: Walk 4.0 mi, 1 h 10min

The route was simple. I had to go straight down south on Fifth Avenue for 3.8 of the 4 miles, and then turn right.

‘Four miles. 6.4 kilometres,’ I mumbled to myself.

An hour and ten minutes to walk, I thought. If I ran, it would be less. If I ran like a mad dog with a pack of wolves chasing it, even lesser.

‘Madhav Jha,’ I whispered to myself. ‘Run.’

I remembered basketball. We used to run and dribble on court all the time.

A basketball court is not the same as six-and-a-half kilometres in

minus six degrees temperature, my sensible mind scoffed.

‘Don’t think. Don’t listen to sense. Just run,’ I told myself and took off.

I ran so fast my surroundings became hazy. Central Park on my right and posh Upper East Side homes on my left whizzed past. My face became numb in the cold air. The jacket began to feel heavy as snow started to seep inside.

I had already spent the entire day walking, whether it was for shopping, walking over to Madison Square Garden or back to Shailesh’s home. I had not eaten much all day either. My legs began to hurt.

‘C’mon Madhav,’ I panted, ‘c’mon.’

Sometimes, when nobody is by your side, you have to become your own cheering squad.

I faked a dribble. It made me go ahead to catch my imaginary ball.

I checked the street sign: 67th Street. Cafe Wha? was near 4th.

‘Don’t look at street signs. Just run, Madhav,’ I said aloud.

I passed a hotel on my left on 60th Street. It had an Indian flag hanging above the main porch.

‘The Pierre: A Taj Hotel,’ a sign said.

The Indian flag unleashed a fresh wave of energy in me.

‘Run,’ I said to myself. ‘You can do this.’

I reached the most famous part of Fifth Avenue, with designer stores on both sides. Tiffany’s was on 57th Street, Louis Vuitton on 51st. Riya’s journals had mentioned these brands.

On 50th Street, I developed a nasty cramp in my stomach. I had to stop. I sat down in a squat and took a few deep breaths.

Time: 11.44 p.m.

‘Damn. There is no time. Feel the pain later,’ I told myself.

I couldn’t move. I scanned the street for cabs. Nothing. I winced in pain.

On my right, I saw the NBA store. The store was shut. It had a huge poster of Kobe Bryant outside. ‘NBA—where amazing happens,’

it said.

‘C’mon, Madhav. Be amazing.’

I stood up. Without thinking, I started to run again.

My legs and abdomen screamed with pain. My nose felt like ice.

However, my head felt like fire. I ran, almost jumped with every stride, and looked straight ahead. Snow was in my sneakers, turning my feet cold and wet.

‘Run, run, run,’ I whispered with every breath I reached a dead end at Washington Square Park.

‘I’m close. Right turn from here.’

Time: 11.56 p.m.

I wanted to rest for a minute.

‘No rest,’ I scolded myself.

I turned right and ran.

The noise of music and the crowd outside made me stop.

Cafe Wha? The lit-up sign greeted me with its bright yellow letters. I pumped my fists.

I plonked my elbows on the ushers desk outside. I tried to speak. Snow fell out of my mouth.

‘M,’ I gasped. ‘I booked a place for Mr M.’

I bent to cough. As my body shook, bits of snow fell off me.

‘Easy there, M. Are you all right?’

I nodded.

‘Your lips are purple. They may fall off, buddy,’ the usher said.

I rubbed my hands and placed them on my mouth. Cold hands did little to warm up an even colder face.

The usher went through his register.

‘Mr M, yes. But the show is almost ending. It’s midnight. Last song probably.’

Time: 12.01 a.m.

‘The singer is still there, right?’ I said, still huffing and puffing as I spoke.

‘Hull? Yeah, maybe just doing a bonus song or something. Entry is eight dollars, two drinks minimum. You sure?’

I slapped a twenty-dollar bill on his desk and walked in. I reached the bar area.

‘Your two drinks, sir?’ said a female bartender.

‘Water and water.’

She gave me two bottles of water. I chugged them down in a flash.

‘Where is the performance?’ I said.

‘Straight left to the concert area. Follow the music.’

I limped ahead. My legs had given way. I held on to bar stools and i hairs to keep myself from falling.

The concert area was a dimly lit room filled with people. The crowd in front of me prevented me from seeing the stage.

I elbowed my way through the hordes of people to get ahead.

I heard a female voice.

‘You’re beautiful. You’re beautiful.’

You're beautiful, it's true.'

The bright spotlight on the stage contrasted with the dark room. It took a few seconds to spot the singer.

It was her.

Riya.

The water bottle fell from my hand.

She sang with her eyes closed, completely engrossed in the song. In a full-length, sequined black gown she looked more beautiful than what even God would define as beautiful.

Yes, Riya Somani, I found you.

She held an acoustic guitar in her hand. A male American pianist accompanied her on stage. She continued to sing.

'I saw your face in a crowded place, And I don't know what to do, 'Cause I'll never be with you.'

My tiredness evaporated. No more aches and pain. Blood flowed through my body again. My face felt flushed and hot compared to the freezing cold a minute ago.

She sang from her heart. The crowd loved her and cheered. She opened her eyes between lines and smiled at the crowd's reaction. She had not seen me yet.

I removed my jacket and put it on a table. I walked right up ahead to the stage and stood before her.

'You're beautiful. You're beautiful.

You're beautiful, it's... '

Her voice vanished as her eyes met mine. The pianist looked at her surprised, wondering why she had missed her lines.

Riya stood up. The guitar looked unsteady in her hand.

The pianist filled the gaps with an instrumental interlude.

Riya put her guitar aside slowly. I continued to look at her.

We stood before each other, silent and frozen. The crowd began to murmur, wondering what was happening.

The pianist figured something was amiss. He took the rnic and continued the song.

'You're beautiful, it's true.'

I just kept looking at her.

What all you made me go through, Riya Somani, my eyes said.

I'm sorry, her eyes said to me. A tear ran down her cheek. Mine too.

I thought I would have so much to say to her when I finally met her. I had mentally rehearsed it many times. I would be angry at first.

I would shout, tell her how much she had put me through. I would then tell her what she meant to me. How I was not that jerk, Rohan. Or that others may have let her down, but I wouldn't. And that my mother could only be happy if I was. I had my speech all planned.

However, neither of us said a word.

We just looked at each other and cried, and cried. After some time she stepped forward. That is all Riya Somani does. She gives you a little clue she is ready. You just need to be alert enough to pick it up. I opened my arms. They shook as she came closer. I took her in my arms.

'I... I'm sorry...' she said.

'Shh,' I said. 'Remember you placed a condition last time? No questions asked twice. I have one now.'

'What?' she said in the softest whisper.

'No questions at all. In fact, if possible, no words.'

She buried her face in my chest. I lifted her chin.

'Riya Somani, I love you. Always have. Always will. Please, never, ever leave me.'

She shook her head and said, 'I won't...I can't...'

I continued, 'Shh... Because next time I will find you again and kill you.'

She smiled and cried at the same time Some of the crowd cheered, even though they were confused about what was going on. The pianist ended the song. The restaurant staff switched on the concert room lights. People began to make their way out.

I continued to hold her.

‘Sorry, I left because I got scared... ’ she said.

‘I know.’

‘But how did you...?’ she said.

‘I said, no questions.’

‘Just one last one.’

‘What?’

‘Why is your shirt so wet and cold?’ she said. I laughed.

‘What?’ she said.

‘Nothing.’

'Upper West, 70th and 6th,' she said.

We were in a black Lincoln car, which the organizers had arranged for the singers. The car took us to her apartment on the Upper West Side near the western side of Central Park. I can't remember much of the journey except her face and the way it looked in the changing lights. And that the city seemed more beautiful than any other night in the past three months. I clasped her hand tightly and leaned back on the seat, just looking at her face.

*

She turned the key and we were in her apartment. There were music posters all over the walls. The window faced the park, now dark, apart from the streetlights. She went to the bedroom to remove her makeup.

In the bathroom I undressed and noticed the bruises and blisters on my feet. My nose and ears looked raw and red. I took a hot shower. I felt like a pack of frozen peas being thawed.

I finished my shower and realized I did not have fresh clothes. A pink oversized T-shirt with a Dora cartoon hung in the bathroom. Perhaps Riya used it as nightwear. I put on the T-shirt, wrapped a towel around my waist and stepped out.

Riya laughed as she saw me in the girly T-shirt.

'Sorry, I didn't...' I said.

She silenced me with a kiss. Her lips felt like warm honey. She kissed me for a long time, holding my face in her hands. Our tongues gently touched. I placed my left hand on her cheek. My right hand kept my towel in place.

She guided my right hand to her back. Her gown was backless, and I felt smooth skin.

She removed my pink T-shirt. I tried to remove her gown but it was too complex a garment for me to understand. I tugged at it, and then gave up.

She unzipped a side zipper and stepped out of it.

We embraced. We kissed. We touched. We caressed. We reached the bedroom, the bed. Our lips never stopped kissing. Our hands never stopped touching.

Every moment felt special as we made love. I entered her, and our eyes met. Both of us felt strong and vulnerable at the same time. I saw tears in her eyes.

‘You okay?’ I said.

She nodded. She brought her face close to my ear to whisper.

‘More than okay. I’m great,’ she said. ‘And you?’

‘More than great,’ I said.

We cuddled afterwards. She slept. I didn’t. I looked at her all night. I realized this only when daylight seeped in through the windows. I turned towards her. Her skin glowed in the morning light. Her eyebrows were still perfect. Her eyes were shut.

‘You sleeping?’ I asked her.

She nodded.

Epilogue

Three and a half years later

‘It’s easily one of the best schools I have seen,’ I said.

‘It was not like this seven years ago,’ Madhav said.

I finished the tour of the Dumraon Royal School. Madhav had invited me as the chief guest for their annual day function.

I passed a music class, from where high-pitched notes could be heard. Madhav knocked on the door.

‘Riya, Chetan sir,’ Madhav whispered.

‘Please don’t call me sir,’ I said.

‘Sorry,’ Madhav said.

Riya stepped out. Madhav had not lied about her looks. She had classic features and an elegant demeanour.

‘Chetan sir, finally. Madhav has talked so much about you,’ Riya said.

‘No sir. And, trust me, Madhav has told me a lot about you too.’

She laughed. Madhav told her to finish the class and meet us outside.

‘It’s lovely here,’ I said. We walked out of the main building into the school garden. Students had decorated the new basketball court with flowers. A function to inaugurate the court was scheduled for later in the evening.

‘We wanted to call you earlier, but thought it better to invite you here when we had a basketball court,’ Madhav said.

‘The court is beautiful.’

‘All the equipment is from the US,’ Madhav said. ‘Riya and I spend three months there every year. She does a few music gigs. I help out at the UN and also do some marketing of my rural tours.’

Madhav explained how they had started rural school tours, which included a stay in the haveli. People came from all over the world, allowing the school to earn revenue in dollars.

‘Tourists spend a day with our kids. They teach them a class, share pictures or talk about their country. They say it is one of the most meaningful things they have ever done in their life.’

‘That’s innovative.’

‘Students love it. They get an exposure to the world. Many tourists send regular grants or gifts to the school later on.’

‘Where’s your mother?’

‘She’ll come soon. She spends less time at the school now. Riya and I run it. Shyam keeps Rani Sahiba busy.’ Madhav laughed.

‘She is okay about Riya?’ I said.

‘You forget that she saw how I had become without her. She says she is happy to have her son back. Not to mention grandson. Her new darling.’

‘How old is your son now?’

‘Will turn two soon,’ Madhav said. ‘Here they come.’

I saw an elderly lady walk towards us holding a little boy’s hand in one hand and a large tiffin box in another.

The school bell rang. Hordes of kids ran out. Riya joined us.

‘Everyone’s here,’ she said.

Shyam extracted his hand from his grandmothers and came running up to his parents. He looked like a chubby baby version of Riya.

‘Shyam is too tall and too naughty for his age,’ Rani Sahiba said when Madhav had introduced us.

We sat in the amphitheatre seats of the basketball court. Riya served everyone a lunch of chapats, daal and carrot-and-peas subzi from the tiffin box.

Shyam saw a basketball on court. He ran down the amphitheatre steps for the ball.

‘Careful,’ Rani Sahiba said.

‘He’s your daredevil grandson,’ Riya said.

Shyam took the ball in his hand.

‘Shoot,’ Riya said.

Shyam took a shot. His little hands couldn't throw the ball high enough to reach anywhere near the basket. He tried two more times and failed.

He looked at his father.

'It's not happening,' he said.

'So what? Don't quit. It will happen one day,' Madhav said.

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girlfriend

My phone beeped. I had a new message. My heart beat fast as I
IS

‘Phil, do you want to?’ Mr Gates said.

Epilogue



Chapter 1

The Strange Demon

‘Sati!’ screamed Shiva, as he rapidly drew his sword and started sprinting towards his wife, pulling his shield forward as he ran.

She’ll run into a trap!

‘Stop!’ yelled Shiva, picking up his pace as he saw her dash into a cluster of trees alongside the road leading to the Ramjanmabhoomi temple in Ayodhya.

Sati was totally focused on chasing the retreating hooded Naga, her sword drawn and held far from her body, like a seasoned warrior with her prey in sight.

It took a few moments for Shiva to catch up with Sati, to ascertain that she was safe. As they continued to give chase, Shiva’s focus shifted to the Naga. He was shocked.

How did that dog move so far ahead?

The Naga, showing surprising agility, was effortlessly navigating between the trees and undulating ground of the hillside, picking up pace. Shiva remembered battling with the Naga at the Brahma temple at Meru, when he had met Sati for the first time.

His slow leg movements at the Brahma temple were just a battle strategy.

Shiva flipped his shield, clipping it on to his back, to get room to run faster. Sati was keeping pace to his left. She suddenly made a grunting sound and pointed to the right, to a fork in the path that was coming up. Shiva nodded. They would split up and try to cut off the Naga from opposite ends on the narrow ridge ahead.

Shiva dashed to his right with a renewed burst of speed, sword at the ready. Sati stayed her course behind the Naga, running equally hard. The ground beneath Shiva’s feet on the new path had evened out and he managed to cover the distance rapidly. He noticed that the Naga had pulled his shield into his right hand. The wrong hand for defence. Shiva frowned.

Quickly coming up to the Naga’s right, with Sati still some distance away, Shiva reached with his left hand, drew a knife and flung it at the Naga’s neck. A stunned Shiva then saw a magnificent manoeuvre that he hadn’t imagined possible.

Without turning to look at the knife or even breaking a step, the Naga pulled his shield forward in the path of the knife. With the knife safely bouncing off the shield, the Naga effortlessly let the shield clip on to his back, maintaining his pace.

Shiva gaped in awe, his speed slackening.

He blocked the knife without even looking at it! Who the hell is this man?

Sati meanwhile had maintained her pace, edging closer to the Naga as Shiva ran in from the other trail onto the path that the Naga was on.

Seeing Sati cross the narrow ridge, Shiva picked up speed, closing in on his wife. Because of the steep angle of the sloping ridge, he could see the Naga further ahead, reaching the wall at the bottom of the hill. The wall protected the Ramjanmabhoomi temple at the base from animal attacks and trespassers. The height of the wall gave Shiva hope. There was no way the Naga could jump over it. He would have to climb, giving Sati and him the crucial seconds needed to catch up and mount an attack.

The Naga came to the same realisation as well. As he neared the wall, he pirouetted on his heels, hands reaching to his sides, drawing out two swords. The sword in his right hand was a traditional long sword, glinting in the evening sun. The one in his left, a short sword with a strange double blade mounted on a central pivot at the hilt. Shiva pulled his shield forward as he neared the Naga. Sati attacked the Naga from his right.

The Naga swung the long sword hard, forcing Sati to step back. With Sati on the back foot, the Naga swerved with his left hand, making Shiva duck to avoid a strike. As the Naga's sword swept safely away, Shiva jumped high and struck down from his height, a blow almost impossible to defend if the opponent is not holding a shield. The Naga, however, effortlessly stepped back, avoiding the strike, while thrusting forward with his short sword, putting Shiva on the back foot. The Neelkanth had to quickly swing his shield up to deflect the blow.

Sati again moved forward, her sword forcing the Naga back. Reaching behind with her left hand, she pulled out a knife and threw it. The Naga bent his head at the exact moment, letting the knife sail harmlessly into the wall. Shiva and Sati were yet to get a single strike on the Naga, but he was progressively being forced to retreat. It was a matter of time before he would be pinned against the wall.

By the Holy Lake, I finally have him.

And then, the Naga swung ferociously with his left hand. The sword was too short to reach Shiva and it appeared to be a wasted manoeuvre. Shiva pushed forward, confident he would strike the Naga on his torso. But the Naga swung back, this time his thumb pressing a lever on the pivot of the short sword. One of the twin blades suddenly extended beyond the length of the other, doubling the reach of the sword. The blade cut Shiva on his shoulder. Its poisoned edge sent a jolt of electricity through his body, immobilising him.

'Shiva!' screamed Sati, as she swung down on the sword in the Naga's right hand, hoping to knock the blade out. Moments before the impact, the Naga dropped his long sword, causing Sati to lurch, her sword slipping out of her hand as she struggled to regain her balance.

'No!' screamed Shiva, helpless on his back, unable to move.

He had noticed what Sati had forgotten. The knife Sati had flung at the Naga, when he had been discovered hiding behind a tree at the Ramjanmabhoomi temple, was tied to his right hand. The Naga swiped with his right hand at the falling Sati's abdomen. Sati realised her mistake too late.

But the Naga pulled his hand back at the last moment. What would have been a lethal blow turned into a surface wound, running a trickle of blood. The Naga jabbed Sati hard with his left elbow, breaking her nose and knocking her down.

With both his enemies immobilised, the Naga quickly flicked his long sword up with his right foot. He swung both his weapons into their scabbards, eyes still on Shiva and Sati. The Naga then jumped high, holding the top of the wall behind him with his hands.

'Sati!' screamed Shiva, rushing towards his wife as the poison released its stranglehold.

Sati was clutching her abdomen. The Naga frowned, for the wound was just a surface nick. Then his eyes flashed wide.

She is carrying a baby.

The Naga crunched his immense stomach, pulling his legs up in one smooth motion, soaring over the wall.

'Press tight!' shouted Shiva, expecting a deep gash.

Shiva breathed easy when he realised that it was a minor wound, though the blood loss and the knock on Sati's nose was causing him worry.

Sati looked up, blood running down her nose and her eyes ablaze with fury. She picked up her sword and growled, 'Get him!'

Shiva turned around, picking up his sword and pushing it into his scabbard as he reached the wall. He clambered quickly over. Sati tried to follow. Shiva landed on the other side on a crowded street. He saw the Naga at a far distance, still running hard.

Shiva started sprinting after the Naga. But he knew the battle was already lost. He was too far behind. He now hated the Naga more than ever. The tormentor of his wife! The killer of his brother! And yet, deep inside, he marvelled at the sheer brilliance of the

Naga's martial skills.

The Naga was running towards a horse tied outside a shop. In an inconceivable movement, he leapt up high, his right hand stretched out. As the Naga landed smoothly on top of the horse, the knife in his right hand slickly cut the reins, freeing the tethered horse. The rearing of the startled horse had caused the reins to fly back. The Naga effortlessly caught them in his left hand. Instantly, he kicked the horse, whispering in the animal's ear. The horse sprang swiftly to the Naga's words, breaking into a gallop.

A man came hurtling out of the shop, screaming loudly, 'Stop! Thief! That's my horse!'

The Naga, hearing the commotion, reached into the folds of his robe and threw something back with tremendous force while continuing to gallop away. The force of the blow caused the horseman to stagger, falling flat on his back.

'By the Holy Lake!' shouted Shiva, sprinting towards what he thought was a grievously injured man.

As he reached the horseman, he was surprised to see him get up slowly, rubbing his chest in pain, cursing loudly, 'May the fleas of a thousand dogs infest that bastard's armpits!'

'Are you all right?' asked Shiva, as he examined the man's chest.

The horseman looked at Shiva, scared into silence at seeing his blood-streaked body.

Shiva bent down to pick up the object that the Naga had thrown at the horseman. It was a pouch, made of the most glorious silk he had ever seen. Shiva opened the pouch tentatively, expecting a trap, but it contained coins. He pulled one out, surprised to see that it was made of gold. There were at least fifty coins. He turned in the direction that the Naga had ridden.

What kind of a demon is he? He steals the horse and then leaves enough gold to buy five more!

'Gold!' whispered the horseman softly as he snatched the pouch from Shiva. 'It's mine!'

Shiva didn't look up, still holding one coin, examining its markings. 'I need one.'

The horseman spoke gingerly, for he did not want to battle a man as powerful-looking as Shiva, 'But...'

Shiva snorted in disgust. He pulled out two gold coins from his own pouch and gave it to the horseman, who, thanking his stars for a truly lucky day, quickly escaped.

Shiva turned back and saw Sati resting against the wall, holding her head up, pressing her nose hard. He walked up to her.

'Are you all right?'

Sati nodded in response, dried blood smeared on her face. 'Yes. Your shoulder? It looks bad.'

'It looks worse than it feels. I'm fine. Don't worry.'

Sati looked in the direction that the Naga had ridden off. 'What did he throw at the horseman?'

'A pouch full of this,' said Shiva as he showed the coin to Sati.

'He threw gold coins?!'

Shiva nodded.

Sati frowned and shook her head. She took a closer look at the coin. It had the face of a strange man with a crown on his head. Strange, because unlike a Naga, he had no deformity.

'He looks like a king of some kind,' said Sati, wiping some blood off her mouth.

'But look at these odd markings,' said Shiva as he flipped the coin.

It had a small symbol of a horizontal crescent moon. But the bizarre part was the network of lines running across the coin. Two crooked lines joined in the middle in the shape of an irregular cone and then they broke up into a spidery network.



'I can understand the moon. But what do these lines symbolise?' asked Sati.

'I don't know,' admitted Shiva. But he did know one thing clearly. His gut instinct was unambiguous.

Find the Nagas. They are your path to discovering evil. Find the Nagas.

Sati could almost read her husband's mind. 'Let's get the distractions out of the way then?'

Shiva nodded at her. 'But first, let's get you to Ayurvati.'

'You need her more,' said Sati.



'You have nothing to do with our fight?' asked a startled Daksha. 'I don't understand, My Lord. You led us to our greatest victory. Now we have to finish the job. The evil Chandravanshi way of life has to end and these people have to be brought to our pure Suryavanshi ways.'

'But, Your Highness,' said Shiva with polite firmness, shifting his bandaged shoulder slightly to relieve the soreness. 'I don't think they are evil. I understand now that my mission is different.'

Dilipa, sitting to the left of Daksha, was thrilled. Shiva's words were a balm to his soul. Sati and Parvateshwar, to Shiva's right, were quiet. Nandi and Veerbhadra stood further away, on guard but listening in avidly. The only one as angry as Daksha was Bhagirath, the crown prince of Ayodhya.

'We don't need a certificate from a foreign barbarian to tell us what is obvious! We are not evil!' said Bhagirath.

'Quiet,' hissed Dilipa. 'You will not insult the Neelkanth.'

Turning towards Shiva with folded hands, Dilipa continued, 'Forgive my impetuous son, My Lord. He speaks before he thinks. You said your mission is different. How can Ayodhya help?'

Shiva stared at a visibly chafing Bhagirath before turning towards Dilipa. 'How do I find the Nagas?'

Startled and scared, Dilipa touched his Rudra pendant for protection as Daksha looked up sharply.

'My Lord, they are pure evil,' said Daksha. 'Why do you want to find them?'

'You have answered your own question, Your Highness,' said Shiva. He turned towards Dilipa. 'I don't believe you are allied with the Nagas. But there are some in your empire who are. I want to know how to reach those people.'

'My Lord,' said Dilipa, swallowing hard. 'It is rumoured that the King of Branga consorts with the dark forces. He would be able to answer your questions. But the entry of any foreign person, including us, is banned in that strange but very rich kingdom. Sometimes, I actually think the Brangas pay tribute to my empire only to keep us from entering their land, not because they are scared of being defeated by us in battle.'

'You have another king in your empire? How is that possible?' asked a surprised Shiva.

'We aren't like the obsessive Suryavanshis. We don't insist on everyone following one single law. Every kingdom has the right to its own king, its own rules and its own way of

life. They pay Ayodhya a tribute because we defeated them in battle through the great *Ashwamedh yagna* .

Horse sacrifice?

‘Yes, My Lord,’ continued Dilipa. ‘The sacrificial horse travels freely through any kingdom in the land. If a king stops the horse, we battle, defeat and annexe that territory. If they don’t stop the horse, then the kingdom becomes our colony and pays us tribute, but is still allowed to have its own laws. So we are more like a confederacy of aligned kings rather than a fanatical empire like Meluha.’

‘Mind your words, you impudent fool,’ ranted Daksha. ‘Your confederacy seems a lot like extortion to me. They pay you tribute because if they don’t, you will attack their lands and plunder them. Where is the Royal Dharma in that? In Meluha, being an emperor does not just give you the right to receive tribute, but it also confers the responsibility to work for the good of all the empire’s subjects.’

‘And who decides what is good for your subjects? You? By what right? People should be allowed to do whatever they wish.’

‘Then there will be chaos,’ shouted Daksha. ‘Your stupidity is even more apparent than your immoral values!’

‘Enough!’ asserted Shiva, struggling to tame his irritation. ‘Will both your Highnesses please desist?’

Daksha looked at Shiva in surprised anger. Seeing a much more confident Shiva, not just accepting, but living his role as the Neelkanth. Daksha’s heart sank. He knew that fulfilling his father’s dream of a member of their family being Emperor of all India, and bringing the Suryavanshi way of life to all its citizens, was becoming increasingly remote. He could defeat the Swadweepans in battle due to his army’s superior tactics and technology, but he did not have enough soldiers to control the conquered land. For that, he needed the faith that the Swadweepans had in the Neelkanth. If the Neelkanth didn’t go along with his way of thinking, his plans were bound to fail.

‘Why do you say that the Brangas are allied with the Nagas?’ asked Shiva.

‘I can’t say for sure, My Lord,’ said Dilipa. ‘But I am going on the rumours that one has heard from traders in Kashi. It is the only kingdom in Swadweep that the Brangas deign to trade with. Furthermore, there are many refugees from Branga settled in Kashi.’

‘Refugees?’ asked Shiva. ‘What are they fleeing from? You said Branga was a rich land.’

‘There are rumours of a great plague that has struck Branga repeatedly. But I’m not quite certain. Very few people can be certain about what goes on in Branga! But the King of Kashi would certainly have better answers. Should I summon him here, My Lord?’

‘No,’ said Shiva, unsure whether this was another wild goose chase or whether the Brangas actually had something to do with the Nagas.

Sati suddenly piped up as a thought struck her and turned towards Dilipa. Her voice was nasal due to the bandage on her nose. ‘Forgive me, Your Highness. But where exactly is Branga?’

‘It is far to the East, Princess Sati, where our revered river Ganga meets their holy river which comes in from the northeast, Brahmaputra.’

Shiva started as he realised something. He turned to Sati, smiling. Sati smiled back.

They aren’t lines! They are rivers!



Shiva reached into his pouch and pulled out the coin he had recovered from the Naga and showed it to Dilipa. 'Is this a Branga coin, Your Highness?' 'Yes, My Lord!' answered a surprised Dilipa. 'That is King Chandraketu on one side and a river map of their land on the other. But these coins are rare. The Brangas never send tribute in coins, only in gold ingots.'

Dilipa was about to ask where Shiva got the coin from, but was cut off by the Neelkanth. 'How quickly can we leave for Kashi?'



'Mmmm, this is good,' smiled Shiva, handing the chillum to Veerbhadra.

'I know,' smiled Veerbhadra. 'The grass is much better here than in Meluha. The Chandravanshis certainly know how to savour the finer things in life.'

Shiva smiled. The marijuana was working its magic on him. The two friends were on a small hill outside Ayodhya, enjoying the evening breeze. The view was stunning.

The gentle slope of the grassy hill descended into a sparsely forested plain, which ended in a sheer cliff at a far distance. The tempestuous Sarayu, which had cut through the cliff over many millennia, flowed down south, rumbling passionately. The sun setting gently beyond the horizon completed the dramatic beauty of the tranquil moment.

'I guess the Emperor of Meluha is finally happy,' smiled Veerbhadra, handing the chillum back to Shiva.

Shiva winked at Veerbhadra before taking a deep drag. He knew Daksha was unhappy about his changed stance on the Chandravanshis. And as he himself did not want any distractions while searching for the Nagas, he had hit upon an ingenious compromise to give Daksha a sense of victory and yet keep Dilipa happy as well.

Shiva had decreed that Daksha would henceforth be known as Emperor of India. His name would not only be taken first during prayers at the royal court at Devagiri, but also at Ayodhya. Dilipa, in turn, would be known as Emperor of Swadweep within the Chandravanshi areas, and the 'brother of the Emperor' in Meluha. His name would be taken after Daksha's in court prayers in both Devagiri and Ayodhya. Dilipa's kingdom would pay a nominal tribute of a hundred thousand gold coins to Meluha, which Daksha had pronounced would be donated to the Ramjanmabhoomi temple in Ayodhya.

Thus Daksha had at least one of his dreams fulfilled: Being Emperor of India. Content, Daksha had returned to Devagiri in triumph. The ever pragmatic Dilipa was delighted that despite losing the war with the Suryavanshis, for all practical purposes, he retained his empire and his independence.

'We leave for Kashi in a week?' asked Veerbhadra.

'Hmmm.'

'Good. I'm getting bored here.'

Shiva smiled handing the chillum back to Veerbhadra. 'This Bhagirath seems like a very interesting fellow.'

'Yes, he does.' Veerbhadra took a puff.

'What have you heard about him?'

'You know,' said Veerbhadra, 'Bhagirath was the one who had thought of taking that contingent of hundred thousand soldiers around our position at Dharmakhet.'

'The attack from the rear? That was brilliant. May have worked too, but for the valour of Drapaku.'

'It would certainly have worked if Bhagirath's orders had been followed to the T.'

'Really?' asked Shiva, smoking.

'I have heard Bhagirath wanted to take his army in the quiet of the night through a

longer route that was further away from the main battleground. If he had done that, we would not have discovered the troop movement. Our delayed response would have ensured that we would have lost the war.'

'So what went wrong?'

'Apparently, the War Council didn't want to meet at night, when Bhagirath called them.'

'Why in the name of the holy lake wouldn't they meet urgently?'

'They were sleeping!'

'You're joking!'

'No, I'm not,' said Veerbhadra, shaking his head. 'And what is worse, when they did meet in the morning, they ordered Bhagirath to stick close to the valley between Dharmakhet and our position, helping us discover their movement.'

'Why the hell did the War Council make such a stupid decision?' asked a flabbergasted Shiva.

'Apparently, Bhagirath is not trusted by his father. And therefore, not by most Swadweepan kings or generals either. They believed he would have taken the soldiers, escaped to Ayodhya and declared himself Emperor.'

'That's ridiculous. Why does Dilipa not trust his own son?'

'Because he believes Bhagirath thinks he is a fool and a terrible emperor.'

'I'm sure Bhagirath doesn't actually think that!'

'Well, from what I've heard,' smiled Veerbhadra as he junked out the ash from the chillum, 'Bhagirath actually *does* think so of his father. And he's not far from wrong, is he?'

Shiva smiled.

'And then, to make matters worse,' continued Veerbhadra, 'the entire fiasco was blamed on Bhagirath. It was said that because he took a hundred thousand soldiers away, they lost the war.'

Shiva shook his head, saddened to see an intelligent man being rubbished by the idiots surrounding him. 'I think he is a capable person, whose wings have been clipped.'

The tranquil moment was suddenly shattered by a loud scream. Shiva and Veerbhadra looked up to see a rider galloping away, while his companion, lagging far behind, was screeching loudly: 'Help! Somebody help, Prince Bhagirath!'

Bhagirath had lost control of his speeding horse and was hurtling towards the cliff. A near certain death. Shiva jumped onto his horse and charged towards him with Veerbhadra in tow. It was a long distance, but the gentle slope helped Shiva and Veerbhadra make up the expanse quickly. Shiva rode in an arc to intercept Bhagirath's horse. A few minutes later, Shiva was galloping along Bhagirath's path. He was impressed that Bhagirath seemed calm and focussed, despite facing a life threatening situation.

Bhagirath was pulling hard on his reins, trying to slow his horse down. But his action agitated the horse even further. It picked up more speed.

'Let the reins go!' shouted Shiva, over the loud rumble of the threateningly close Sarayu river.

'What?!' screamed Bhagirath. All his training told him letting the reins go was the stupidest thing to do when a horse was out of control.

'Trust me! Let it go!'

Bhagirath would later explain it to himself as fate guiding him towards the Neelkanth. At this moment, his instinct told him to forget his training and trust this barbarian from Tibet. Bhagirath let go. Much to his surprise, the horse immediately slackened.

Shiva rode in close. So close that he could almost whisper into the animal's ear. Then he began to sing a strange tune. The horse gradually started calming down, reducing its speed to a canter. The cliff was coming close. Very close.

'Shiva!' warned Veerbhadra. 'The cliff is a few hundred metres away!'

Shiva noted the warning, matching the pace of his horse with Bhagirath's. The prince kept his control, staying on the horse, while Shiva kept singing. Slowly but surely, Shiva was gaining control. It was just a few metres before the cliff that Bhagirath's horse finally came to a halt.

Bhagirath and Shiva immediately dismounted as Veerbhadra rode in.

'Damn!' said Veerbhadra, peering towards the cliff. 'That was too close!'

Shiva looked at Veerbhadra, before turning towards Bhagirath. 'Are you all right?'

Bhagirath kept staring at Shiva, before lowering his eyes in shame. 'I'm sorry for putting you through so much trouble.'

'No trouble at all.'

Bhagirath turned to his horse, hitting its face hard for embarrassing him.

'It's not the horse's fault!' shouted Shiva.

Bhagirath turned back to Shiva, frowning. Shiva walked towards Bhagirath's horse, gently cradling its face, almost like it was a child being punished unfairly. Then he carefully pulled its reins out, signalled to Bhagirath to come closer and showed him the nail buried in the leather close to the horse's mouth.

Bhagirath was shocked. The inference was obvious.

Shiva pulled the nail out, handing it to Bhagirath. 'Somebody doesn't like you, my friend.'

Meanwhile, Bhagirath's companion had caught up with them. 'My Prince! Are you all right?'

Bhagirath looked towards his companion. 'Yes I am.'

Shiva turned towards the man. 'Tell Emperor Dilipa his son is an exceptional rider. Tell him that the Neelkanth has yet to see a man with greater control over an animal, even when the odds were stacked so desperately against him. Tell him the Neelkanth requests the honour of Prince Bhagirath accompanying him to Kashi.'

Shiva knew that for Dilipa, this would not be a request but an order. This was probably the only way of keeping Bhagirath safe from the unknown threat to his life. The companion immediately went down on his knee. 'As you command, My Lord.'

Bhagirath stood dumbfounded. He had come across people who plotted against him, people who took credit for his ideas, people who sabotaged him. But this... This was unique. He turned to his companion. 'Leave us.'

The man immediately rode away.

'I have experienced such kindness from only one person up until now,' said Bhagirath, his eyes moist. 'And that is my sister, Anandmayi. But blood justifies her actions. I don't know how to react to your generosity, My Lord.'

'By not calling me Lord,' smiled Shiva.

'That is one order I would request you to allow me to refuse,' said Bhagirath, his hands folded in a respectful namaste. 'I will follow any other order you give. Even if it is to take my own life.'

'Now don't get so dramatic! I am not about to ask you to commit suicide right after having worked strenuously to save your life.'

Bhagirath smiled softly. 'What was it you sang to my horse, My Lord?'

'Sit with me over a chillum sometime and I will teach you.'

'It will be my honour to sit at your feet and learn, My Lord.'

'Don't sit at my feet, my friend. Sit beside me. The sound carries a little better there!'

Bhagirath smiled as Shiva patted him on the shoulder.