

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

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

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

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

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

I ignored the comment and went into the booth.

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

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

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

I kept silent. The meter started to click.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'I'm not interested.'

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

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

'How is the food?'

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

'I'm going to send some pickle.'

'The city has good restaurants.'

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

'In a few places.'

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

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

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

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

'Who? What's their name?'

'An...Anant.'

'Punjabi?'

'Mom!'

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

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

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

'Sure, let me finish studying first.'

I hung up and paid twenty-five bucks.

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

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

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

'And pay?'

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

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

'Why?' Ananya looked at me.

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

'Sure,' she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She nodded.

'Sounds ridiculous?'

'No, not really,' she said.

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

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

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

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

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

'You are not using me, are you?'

'Excuse me?'

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

'Are you kidding me?' she looked shocked.

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

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

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

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

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

'What?'

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

I smiled.

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

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

4

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

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

'Your shorts are too short,' I said.

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

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

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

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

'Hey, you OK?'

I kept quiet.

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

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

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

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

'Like what?'

'Like in these shorts,' I said.

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

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

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

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

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

I shook my head.

‘Up to you.’

I ignored her and continued to walk.

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

I shrugged to signify ‘whatever’.

‘Any dress code for me?’ she said.

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

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

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

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

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

‘What are you trying to prove?’

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

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

'Don't patronize me,' she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Are you jealous?'

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

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

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

5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'No, I'd better go,'

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

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

'What?' she said surprised.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I looked away from her.

'Eye contact please.'

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

'I can't,' I said.

'Can't what?'

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

'What?' She sat up straight.

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

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

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

'Hey.' She touched my shoulder.

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

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

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

We exchanged glances, silent for a minute.

'What do you want?' she asked.

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

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

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

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

I nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘And don’t expect more,’ Ananya said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I looked at her and smiled.

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

7

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

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

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

She laughed. ‘Was this your first time?’

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

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

I kept quiet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Why? Who was she? A student?’

‘Prof’s daughter.’

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

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

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

‘Similar?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Where is she now? Campus?’

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

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

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

‘Did you love her?’

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

‘One last question. Is she South Indian?’

‘How do you know?’

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

I laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

'Hey, we.....'

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

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

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

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

'Yes,' I said.

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

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

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

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

'So what?'

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

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

'And you?' I asked.

'I'm going to think about it.'

'Excuse me?'

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

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

She laughed. I threw a pillow at her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'WPM?'

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

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

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

'About anything. Like that girlfriend of yours.'

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

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

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

'I love you,' she said.

'Mean it?'

'Yes.'

'How come you said it now?'

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

One-and-a-half years later

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

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

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

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

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

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

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