

New Book

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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 5:

Goa

51

'I am telling you now only. I don't like her mother – arrogant woman,' my mom said as we waited at the taxi stand. My mother and I landed at the Dabolim Airport in Goa two hours before Ananya and her parents did. I had tried to time the flights as close as possible.

'It's not arrogance. They are quiet people,' I said.

'Don't be under their spell,' my mother said.

'I'm not. OK, here they come, remember to smile,' I said.

Ananya's parents came face to face with my mother for the second time.

'Hello Kavita-ji,' Ananya's father said. They exchanged greetings, not warm and cuddly like Delhi airports, but not completely ice-cold either.

I had hired a Qualis. I helped the driver load Ananya's bags into the car. My mother gave me a puzzled look.

'What?' I said.

She shook her head.

I sat in front. Ananya's family took the middle seat.

'Oh, I'll sit at the back,' my mother said.

'OK,' Ananya's mother said.

I realised the faux pas. 'No, mom, I will take the backseat,' I said. My mother declined as she had already taken her place.

'Park Hyatt,' I said. The driver turned the car towards South Goa. My mother took out a plastic packet from her bag.

'Here, for you,' my mother said and passes a sari to Ananya's mother.

Ananya's mother turned around and took the packet. 'Thank you,' she said.

'It's tussar silk,' my mother said, 'I bought it from the Assam emporium.'

‘Silk is very popular in the South also, we have Kanjeevaram saris,’ Ananya’s mother said and she kept the sari in her bag.

We didn’t speak much until we reached the resort.

Hotel staff received us with a garland of flowers and a fruit-punch welcome drink. None of us had ever stayed in a five-star hotel.

‘Isn’t this expensive?’ my mother said.

‘They gave me a deal. I promised I’ll get Citibank to do their annual conference here,’ I said.

‘Welcome, Mr Krish, we have two garden view rooms booked for you,’ the receptionist said. ‘And I have some good news. One of the rooms, we are offering an upgrade to a larger, sea-view room.’

‘Wow,’ Ananya said, ‘I’ve never stayed in a sea-view room.’

Of course, Ananya and I weren’t staying together. I was to share a room with my mother while Ananya would be with her parents. And since they were three of them, I made the choice.

‘Ananya, your family can take the larger room. Mom and I will take the other one,’ I said.

The bell-boys carried the luggage to our room. ‘Nice place, no?’ I said to my mother as we passed a flower garden.

My mother didn’t respond.

‘Everything OK?’ I said.

My mother gave a brief nod. She kept quiet until we had reached the room.

‘They are very rude people,’ my mother said.

‘Who? The hotel staff?’ I said as I opened the curtains to see the garden view.

‘Shut up, these people you want to make your in-laws. Are they in-laws? They are making their son-in-law pick up luggage?’

‘Huh? When?’ I asked.

‘At the airport. You don’t even realise you have become their servant?’

‘I....’ I said, searching for a response, ‘I wanted to help.’

‘Nonsense, and why did they take the sea-view room? We are the boy’s side.’

‘They are more people. Besides, do you care? Isn’t the garden pretty?’

‘Whatever, have you noticed their biggest blunder?’ she said.

‘What?’

‘They didn’t get anything. I gave their daughter two bangles. They should have some shame.’

In Punjabi terms, Ananya’s parents had committed a cognizable offence. You don’t meet the boy’s side empty-handed. Ever.

‘And I gave her a silk sari for two thousand bucks. She didn’t even appreciate it.’

‘She did.’

‘No, she was bragging about her South saris,’ my mother said.

This is one of the huge downsides of getting married. A guy has to get involved in discussion about saris and gold.

‘Mom, we have come here to get to know them. Don’t pre-judge, please. And now, get ready for dinner.’

‘You will take their side only. You are trapped.’ She muttered. ‘Stupid boy, doesn’t know his own value.’

52

Few things bring out the differences between Punjabis and Tamilians than buffet meals. Tamilians see it like any other meal. They will load up on white rice first, followed by daal and curds and anything that has little dots of mustard, coconut or curry leaves.

For Punjabis, food triggers an emotional response, like say music. And the array of dishes available in a buffet is akin to the Philharmonic orchestra. The idea is you load as many calories as possible onto one plate, as most party caterers charged based on the number of plates used. Also, like my mother explained since childhood, never take a dish that is easily prepared at home or whose ingredients are cheap. So, no yellow daal, boring gobi aloo or green salad. The focus is on the chicken, dishes with dry fruits in them and exotic desserts.

‘You can take more than one plate here, mom,’ I said as she tossed three servings of butter chicken for me.

‘Really? No extra charge?’ she said.

We returned to our table. ‘You are having rice?’ my mother said as she saw the others’ plates.

They nodded as they ate with spoons. Their fingers itched to feel the squishy texture of rice mixed with curd and daal. Ananya had made them curb their primal instincts to prevent shocking my mother.

‘Chicken is too good. Did you try?’ my mother said and lifted up a piece to offer them.

‘We are vegetarian,’ Ananya’s mother said coldly, even as the chicken leg hung mid-air.

‘Oh,’ mother said.

‘It’s OK, aunty, I will try it.’ Ananya said.

We ate in much silence with only our chewing making a sound.

‘Amma, something something,’ Ananya whispered in Tamil, egging her on to talk.

‘Your husband didn’t come?’ Ananya’s mother said.

‘No, he is not well. Doctor has told him not to travel by air,’ my mother said.

‘There is a train to Goa from Delhi,’ Ananya’s father supplied. Ananya gave her father a glance, making him return to his food.

‘We don’t travel by train,’ my mother said, lying of course. I have no idea why.

She continued, ‘Actually, Punjabis are quite large-hearted people. We like to live well. When we meet people, we give them nice gifts.’

‘Mom, do you want dessert? There is mango ice-cream,’ I said.

She ignored me. ‘Yeah, we never meet anyone empty-handed. Oh and meeting the boy’s side empty-handed is unthinkable,’ my mother said as I gently stamped her foot.

‘OK, I’ve booked a car for sightseeing tomorrow. Please be in the coffee shop by seven,’ I said.

‘I’ll sightseeing,’ Ananya’s mother mumbled.

‘Sure, we’ll be there,’ Ananya said.

Ananya and I met for a walk post-dinner at Park Hyatt’s private beach.

‘My parents are upset,’ Ananya said, ‘your mother should learn to talk.’

The waves splashed the shore as many tourist couples walked hand-in-hand in front of us. I bet they weren’t discussing the mood swings of their future in-laws.

‘Your parents should know how to behave,’ I said.

There we were, at one of the most romantic locations in India, having our first marital discord. In an Indian love marriage, by the time everyone gets on board, one wonders if there is any love left.

‘How can they behave better?’ she said.

‘I will tell you. But you must do exactly as I said,’ I said.

‘If it is reasonable,’ said my sensible girlfriend.

‘Step one, buy my mother an expensive gift.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, step two, when we go out in Goa tomorrow, always offer to pay.’

'Everywhere?'

'Yes, at restaurants, to taxis or anywhere else. And when you offer, she will say no. but insist, if needed, snatch her purse to prevent her from paying. In Punjabi, this is considered OK, even affectionate.'

Ananya's jaw went slack.

'Step three, never let me do any work when everyone's around. For example, at the breakfast table, tell your mother to bring toast for me.'

She snorted.

'That's what my mom expects. Do it,' I said.

Her face looked defiant.

'I beg you,' I said.

'Anything else?' she said.

'Yes, step four is to make love to me on the beach.'

'Nice try, pretty Punjabi boy. But sorry, nothing's happening until we cross the finish line now.'

'Ananya, c'mon,' I coaxed.

'We have to fix the family situation. I'm too tense to think of anything else,' Ananya said.

'OK, if tomorrow goes well, then can we do it on the beach? We will call it Operation Beach Passion.'

'We'll see. Beach Passion,' she smiled and smacked my head. 'Let's go back, my dad is waiting for me.'

The day tour of Goa went off without fireworks, mainly due to the presence of a friendly Goan tour guide. We went to Bom Jesus Basilica, the oldest church in Goa.

‘Light a candle with someone you love,’ the guide said. I had to choose between Ananya and my mother. Given the sensitivity of the trip, I went with the latter.

We also visited Dona Paula, the climax location for the movie ***Ek Dujhe Ke Liye***.

“Famous movie shot here. North Indian boy, South Indian girl. Difficult to get along, so they die,’ the guide said.

‘What else could have happened?’ my mother smirked. I let it pass.

Ananya’s parents stayed back in Panjim for shopping.

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We met Ananya's parents at dinner. All buffet meals at Park Hyatt were paid for as part of the package. They came to the coffee shop with three brown bags.

'Kavita-ji, this is for you,' Ananya's father passed the bags to my mother.

'No, no, what is the need?' my mother simpered as she took the gifts.

The first bag had three saris. The second bag had four shirts for me. The third bag contained sweets, savoury snacks and Goan cashews.

I cruised the buffet counters with Ananya.

'Enough or does she want more?' Ananya said.

'It's cool. This is exactly what works,' I reassured her.

All of us sat at the table and ate in silence. I always found it scary to eat with Ananya's family, who ate their meals as if in mourning. If I found the lack of conversation awkward, my mother hated it. She shifted in her seat several times. The only sound was cutlery clanging on the plates.

My mother spoke after five minutes. 'See, how times have changed. Our kids decide, and we have to meet each other.'

'Yes, initially we had a big shock. But Krish lived in Chennai for six months. Once we knew him, we were ok,' Ananya's mother said in her naturally stern voice.

'What OK? You must be jumping with joy inside. Where would you find such a qualified boy like him?' my mother said. I prayed Ananya's mother wouldn't bite at the bait. Of course, she did.

'Actually, we do get qualified boys. Tamils value education a lot. All her uncles are engineers or doctors. Ananya had many matches from the USA.'

'Yeah, but they must be all dark boys. Were there any as fair as Krish? Looks-wise you cannot match Punjabis,' my mother said, without any apparent viciousness in her voice. I almost choked on the spaghetti in my mouth.

'Mom, they changed dessert today,' I coughed, 'do you like bread pudding?'

‘And my brothers are also doing well,’ my mother said. ‘Ask Ananya what a wedding she has attended. They gave a Santro to the groom. You may have landed my son, but it doesn’t mean he has no value.’

Ananya imitated a stunned goldfish while I shook my head to deny responsibility for that statement.

‘We haven’t trapped anyone,’ Ananya’s mother said finally. ‘He used to keep coming to our house. We are decent people so we couldn’t say no.’

‘Mom,’ Ananya said.

‘Why should I be quiet and get falsely accused? We haven’t trapped anyone. Aren’t we suffering? We all know Krish’s father is against this. Our relatives will ask. Still we are accepting it,’ Ananya’s mother said.

‘What are you accepting? You don’t even deserve my boy,’ my mother said, her voice nice and loud.

‘Please don’t shout. We are educated people,’ Ananya’s father said.

Are you saying we are not educated?’ my mother challenged.

‘He meant “we” as in all of us, right, uncle? We are all educated,’ I hastily put in.

‘Will you continue to take their side and clap while your mother gets humiliated?’ my mother asked.

‘No mom,’ I said, wondering if I had taken sides. ‘I won’t.’

Ananya’s family spoke to each other in Tamil. Uncle looked especially distressed as he took short, jerky breaths.

‘My father is not well. We will go back to our room,’ Ananya said.

I looked at him in alarm.

“Krish, we will see you later,’ Ananya added.

‘Mom,’ I said in protest after they left.

‘What? Is there bread pudding? Let’s get some,’ she said.

My mother and I came back to our room. She pretended nothing had happened.

‘How does this remote work? I want to watch my serial,’ she said.

‘Mom, you could have behaved better there,’ I said.

My mother didn’t answer in words. She responded in nuclear weapons. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

‘Oh please,’ I said.

My mother didn’t respond. She switched to her favourite soap where a son was throwing his old parents out of his house. She cried along with the TV parents, correlating their situation to hers. Yeah right, she was staying in Park Hyatt and ate four kinds of ice-cream and bread pudding for dessert. But, of course, all sons are villains playing into the hands of their wives.

‘We can’t have a conversation if you watch this stupid serial,’ I said.

‘This is not stupid. This is hundred percent reality,’ she retorted.

I switched off the TV. My mother folded her hands. ‘Please have mercy on me,’ she said, ‘don’t subject me to this.’

The doorbell rang. I opened the door. Ananya stood there, her face equally wreathed in ears. When estrogen attacks you on all sides, there is not much you can do.

‘What happened?’ I said.

‘Dad’s chest is hurting,’ Ananya said, fighting back her sobs.

‘Should I call a doctor?’ I said.

‘No, he is fine now. But something else can help.’

‘What?’ I said.

‘Is your mom inside? Can I talk to her?’ she said.

‘Sure,’ I stepped back.

Ananya came in and told my mother who was sitting on the bed. ‘Aunty, I think you should apologise to my parents.’

‘Yes it is always my fault,’ my mother mocked, looking at me for support.

‘Aunty, please don’t generalize. We spent four hours in Panjim today buying gifts for you. My parents did whatever Krish asked us to do.’

‘What?’ my mother said.

Aunty, you have insulted them. They have not trapped anyone. They were dead against Krish to begin with. And now they have accepted him, they’d like some dignity.’

‘I am not.....’ my mother started to talk.

‘OK, enough,’ I said.

Both the women turned to me.

‘Get your parents here,’ I said, ‘let’s talk this straight. Everyone has hurt everyone.’

‘No Krish, today my parents didn’t do anything,’ Ananya said.

My mother went into the bathroom.

‘Ananya, try and understand,’ I whispered. ‘You push my mother into a corner, it will get worse. Let’s make it a mutual apology.’ I walked Ananya to the door.

‘I don’t like this,’ Ananya said at the door.

‘Bring everyone here, please,’ I said.

I came back into the room. My mother had washed her face.

‘I’ve called all of them here. Let’s have a frank talk,’ I said.

She kept quiet.

‘What’s up, mom? Say something,’ I said. I wanted my mother to vent out before Ananya arrived with her parents.

‘You saw Ananya? Have you seen any girl talk to her mother-in-law like that?’ my mother demanded.

‘She is a little feminist type, I admit,’ I said.

‘She is telling me to apologise. Can you imagine Minti talking to Duke’s mother like that?’

'She is different. She is confident, independent and intelligent. But she is caring and sensitive too.'

'She is too intelligent to be a good daughter-in-law.'

I had no clue how to respond to that, but I had to calm her. 'She isn't that intelligent, mom,' I assured her. 'She did economics, but I beat her in that subject.'

'We don't have bahu in Punjabis like that, no matter how high-profile. We keep them straight,' my mother said.

'So we will too,' I said to pacify her.

'She is out of control.'

'Mom, she is here with her parents here. But I am marrying only her; once she comes to our house, we can control her. You only say, no, that South Indians are docile and scared,' I said whatever my mother needed to hear.

'I don't want my daughter-in-law to raise her voice or answer me back. She has to be under my thumb.'

'Fine, make her toe the line.' I said, 'but be normal now.'

'I heard that,' Ananya said, her face red. Ananya stood there with her parents. Damn, I hadn't shut the door after Ananya left.

'Ananya? I didn't realise you were here,' I said.

'And I didn't realise what I was doing. So, I will be taught to toe the line after marriage. Well done, Krish, it's not just your mother, it is you as well,' Ananya said.

'Ananya, I....' Both women stared at me with tear-ready eyes, ready to shoot their ultimate emotional laser weapons.

Ananya's father tapped his wife's shoulders, signaling departure.

'I told my parents your mother will apologise. But you guys are making bigger plans,' Ananya said and walked out of the room with her parents.

I ran out and caught up with Ananya. "Wait, where are you going?"

'We're done,' she said, her words firm despite the wobbly voice.

'What do you mean?'

'It's over,' Ananya clarified, 'between you and me.'

'Are you breaking up with me? What? Ananya, are you crazy? I was manipulating her so she'd calm down.'

'I hate manipulations, Krish, and I hate manipulators even more,' Ananya said and broke into tears.

Ananya's father came towards us and held Ananya's hand. 'It's not about communities. It's about the kind of people we want to be with,' he said.

I stood alone in the corridor as Ananya's family walked away and the ground tilted around my feet.

Needless to say, Operation Beach Passion was not executed that night.

The Final Act: Delhi & Chennai & Delhi & Chennai

54

I turned workaholic after Goa, spending fourteen maniacal hours a day in the office. I even bought the company laptop home to slog more. I achieved twice my work targets, I didn't socialise, I didn't see movies and I stopped going to restaurants.

'You have a great future,' Rannvijay, my new boss, told me.

When Citibank sees a great future in you, it means you have no life at present.

'Thanks, Rannvijay,' I said.

'Though you could do with a shave. What's with the new look? Growing a beard? And you look weak.... Take care of your health.'

I had tried to call Ananya several times after my return. Her parents would not pass her the phone if I called home. In her office, the receptionist would tell me she was in a meeting. When I did reach her, she'd make an excuse and not converse. Ananya had a cell-phone now, but she stopped taking any calls from Delhi. One day I had a visitor in office from Citibank Mumbai. I requested him for his phone to make a call.

'Hello,' Ananya picked up the phone.

'Hi, don't hang up. It's me, ' I said.

'Krish, please...whose phone is this?'

'A colleague from the Mumbai office. Listen, I am sorry, for the tenth time. Your receptionist will have a count of my earlier attempts.'

'Krish, this isn't about an apology.'

'Then stop sulking.'

'I am not sulking; I am doing what maximises everyone's happiness in the long term.'

I scratched my head to respond to her corporate-vision type answer. 'What about you and me?'

'For my own sake, I can't let make my parents feel small.'

'Don't you miss me?' I said.

She kept silent. I checked the phone; I had spent four minutes on the call. My colleague gave me puzzled looks as to why I had to use his phone.

‘Ananya? I said, do you miss me?’

‘What’s the point? Say, I forgive you, what will change? Will your mother change? Will her bias towards me, towards South Indians, towards the girl’s change?’

‘She is good at heart, Ananya. Believe me she is,’ I said.

‘Oh really, why don’t you have her apologise to my parents then?’ she said.

It was my turn to stay silent.

‘See,’ she said.

‘She is sensitive about everything right now.’

‘No, she has a chip on her shoulder about being from the groom’s side.’

I let out a sigh. ‘Ananya, what happened to our plans to elope? Run away with me,’ I said.

‘And go where? To my caring, nurturing mother-in-law?’ Ananya said, ‘No, I want to marry where my parents are treated as equals.’

‘You should have been born as a boy,’ I said.

‘That’s so sexist, I would have hung up if I didn’t care for you.’

‘Do you care or not ? Don’t you love me? Isn’t our love above everything?’

‘Don’t ask impractical questions,’ she said, her voice heavy.

‘Can I do anything? Anything?’ I said desperately.

‘Don’t call me again. Help me get over this,’ She said.

‘I love you,’ I said.

‘Bye, Krish.’

I came home and sat down in front of the TV. For dysfunctional families, television is the biggest boon. Without this electronic glue, millions of Indian families will fall apart.

The music channels showed songs of everlasting love. The couples seemed insanely happy. Perhaps, they were all from the same state, religion, caste and culture and their parents were completely in sync with each other. Otherwise, how can you fall in Love in India? Some grown-ups in your house are bound to get pissed off.

My mother didn't talk about Goa or show any signs of remorse. She did feel a little guilty about my low mood; her penance consisted of cooking paneer dishes everyday.

'I've made paneer bhurji. You'll have paranthas with it?' she said.

I didn't respond. She took my lack of protest for a yes. She returned with dinner with twenty minutes. 'You want white butter?' my mother asked.

I shook my head.

'Too much work in office? There is a Canara Bank near our house. Should I talk to the manager for a job?'

'No, office is OK,' I said.

I tried to eat, but couldn't. I had not eaten anything for three days. I hid the paranthas in my laptop bag when she wasn't looking.

'Shipra masi had recommended another girl. They have bungalow in Shalimar Bagh. Would you like to see her?' she said.

I stared at my mother.

'What?' she said.

'I'll marry her. No need to see her. Fine?' I said.

'Krish, don't say like that. When have I forced you?'

‘What is the point of me seeing these girls? What am I supposed to check out in one hour? Her complexion? Figure – fat or slim? Is the marble in her home real? None of this matters when you have to spend your life with the person, so might as well save time. The parents should do the meeting. Whoever massages your ego more, say yes.’

‘What happened to you? These multinationals are sucking your blood,’ my mother said.

‘Can you apologize to Ananya’s parents?’ I said.

My mother didn’t respond. She stood up from the sofa and went into the kitchen.

I followed her ‘Why can’t you do it?’ I said.

She didn’t answer me. She dabbed at dishwashing detergent with a sponge and scrubbed the utensils. She addressed an imaginary audience:

‘First a useless husband, now a useless son. I had thought, after my son’s marriage. I will get respect. I said yes to his choice of girl, but at least behave like the girl’s side. Now he wants me to fall at their feet. What is so great about this girl? Shipra is right, everyone is selfish.’

‘Stop it, mom, I am not telling you to grovel. You can apologize over the phone.’

‘Apologize for what? Is it wrong to expect what is due to me? Didn’t I look after your grandmother until she died?’

‘Didn’t Ananya help set Duke’s family right? Didn’t you say yes then?’

‘I was wrong. I hadn’t met her parents then. I’ve never met such a dry breed of people. Look at how they eat dinner, like it is a punishment. Ananya’s mother – does she ever laugh? Dark from outside, dark from inside.’

The doorbell rang. My father had come back from another of his lacklustre business ventures. I switched off the TV and opened the door. I had told him the partial truth about Goa. I had said there was an office conference there and that I

was taking mom along. I had become quiet after my return and didn't even bother to fight with him anymore. He came inside and noticed the silence between my mother and me. There were several evenings these days at home when no one spoke to anyone.

'Have you decided to stop talking to your mother, too?' my father asked as he sat on the sofa and removed his shoes.

It's none of your business, would have been my usual response. But I had fought enough with the world. Another argument wouldn't have yielded anything.

'We'll be fine,' I said. I wished my mother would bring his dinner soon.

'Are you not enjoying your job?' my father said.

'The job is good. They said I've a great future,' I said. I don't know why I said the last line. Somehow, I felt the need to tell my father I was doing well.

'Why are you upset with your mother?' he said.

Ok, it was enough. 'It's none of your business,' I said.

'Are you telling me my own family is not my business?' he said.

'Dad, enough. I am too tired to argue.'

My mother brought him dinner and I went back to my room. I took out Ananya's pictures. I tossed and turned in bed wondering what to do next. When you can't sleep, your mind comes up with weird schemes. I couldn't do it over the phone. I had to go in person to do it.

I woke up at four and took a shower.

'You are going to office now?' my mother said as she heard me get ready.

'I have a presentation, I'll be back late,' I said.

I took an auto to the airport. I plonked a month's salary to take my cross-country joyride.

'Same day return trip to Chennai please.' I said at the Indian Airlines counter.

55

Chennai seemed embarrassingly familiar on my second trip. I could throw in Tamil terms and negotiate with autos. I knew the main roads. I reached Ananya's office at eleven.

'Hi, I'm Krish,' I said to the receptionist.

'Oh, that Krish,' she said and called Ananya.

Ananya came out. I opened my arms to embrace her, but she shook hands.

'I came for the day,' I said, as we sat in the HLL cafeteria.

'You shouldn't have,' she said. 'What's with the unshaven look? And why do you seem so weak? Are you sick?'

'I want to meet your parents,' I said.

'There is no use. No matter how charming you are, they don't trust you anymore,' Ananya said.

'Do you trust me?'

'Irrelevant,' she said.

'I'll go to your place,' I said.

'Don't, Harish's parents are in town. They will visit my parents today.'

I took a deep breath to keep my temper in control. 'At least spend the day with me,' I said.

'I can't. I have work. Besides, it is not good for my parents' reputation.'

Blood rushed up my face. 'What reputation? What about Ahmedabad? What about when you'd lie to them to meet me in Chennai? What about Ratna Stores?' My voice was as loud as my body was tired.

She stood up. 'Please don't create a scene at my workplace.'

'Please don't play with my life.'

'I'm not doing anything! Be strong, move on,' she said. 'It's not easy for me. So please, let me be.'

She went back to her office, leaving me still sitting there burning with fatigue and fury. I hadn't shaved for ten days. Other girls in the cafeteria stayed away from me. I resembled a Kollywood villain who could rape anyone anywhere anytime. My flight didn't leave until the evening. I had half a day and no money to spend. Like a total loser, I decided to go to Citibank and visit Bala.

'Krish!' Bala said, shocked at my presence and appearance.

'Hi, how is the champion of the South?'

'I'm fine, but you look fucked,' he said,

'I am,' I said and slumped in front of him.

Bala ordered coffee for both of us. He pulled his chair forward, eager to hear gossip from the other office.

'Is Citi Delhi screwing you? Don't tell me you want to come back.'

'Fuck off Bala, you think Citibank can get the better of me?' I said.

'Someone clearly has. Boy, your eyes. Do you have conjunctivitis?'

I shook my head. He touched my arm.

'Dude you have high fever. Do you want to see a doc?'

'I want a drink. Can you get me a drink?' I said.

'Now? It is not even lunchtime.'

My stomach roiled and I retched. Thankfully, nothing came out and Bala's office could maintain its pre-me conditions.

'You are sick. My cousin is a doctor, I'll call him. He works in City Hospital on

the next street.'

'What do girls think? We can't live without them?' I muttered. I couldn't believe I was venting out to Bala. But I needed someone, anyone.

Bala dropped me at the clinic run by his cousin, Dr Ramachandran or Dr Ram. Dr Ram had returned from the US two years ago after being a general surgeon, working on cancer research and collecting several top degrees. He told me to go to the examination bed as he collected his instruments.

'I'll see you later then,' Bala said.

'You South Indians have too much brain but too little heart,' I said to Bala as he left.

'I heard that,' Dr Ram said as he came to me. He put a cold stethoscope on my chest.

'So, this is a situation involving a girl? Dr Ram asked.

'What girl?'

'When did you eat last?' he said.

'I don't remember,' I said.

'What's that smell?' the doc said. He sniffed his way to my laptop bag. Stale paranthas stank up the room. 'What's this?'

'Last night's dinner,' I said. 'Oh my laptop, I hope it is OK.'

I opened my laptop and switched the power on. It worked fine.

'Can I see it?' Dr Ram said, pointing to my computer.

'Yes sure, are you looking to buy one?' I said.

He didn't respond. He spent five minutes at my computer and gave it back to me.

'What?'

'You should rest and eat food for sure. But you also need to see a psychiatrist.'

‘What? Why?’ I said. Sure, I am bit of psycho, but I didn’t want to make it official.

‘What is the name of the girl?’ Dr Ram said.

‘What girl? I don’t like girls.’

‘Bala said she is Tamilian. Ananya Swaminathan who stays in Mylapore, right?’ he said.

‘I don’t like Tamilians,’ I screamed. ‘And don’t mention her name or neighborhood.’

‘Good, because the psychiatrist I am referring you to is a Tamilian girl. Dr Iyer is upstairs. Please go now.’

‘Doctor, I have to catch a flight. I am fine.’

I pushed myself off the bed. My legs felt as if the blood had drained from them. I couldn’t balance. I fell on the floor.

Dr Ram helped me back up.

‘What problem do I have?’ I said, worried for the first time about my illness.

He handed me the specialist referral letter as he spoke again.

‘There’s no precise medical term. But some would refer to it as the early signs of a nervous breakdown.’

56

‘So, that’s it, I’ve told you everything.’ I said.

Dr Neeta Iyer broke into laughter as I finished my story.

‘This is insane. You find comedy in my tragedy?’ I was miffed.

She didn’t stop laughing.

‘I’m paying you to treat me,’ I said and checked the time. ‘And I had to leave for the airport in twenty minutes.’

It dawned on me that I had spoken to her for four hours. I had no money for this extravagance.

‘Sorry,’ she said, ‘you reminded me of my first boyfriend. He was North Indian.

‘You didn’t marry him?’

‘He didn’t want to commit,’ she shook her head.

‘Oh, sorry,’ I said.

‘It’s OK. I’m over it.’

‘Of course you are, you are a therapist. You should be able to cure yourself, if nothing else.’

She walked to the window. ‘Ah Krish, it doesn’t work like that. A broken heart is the hardest to repair.’

I sighed. ‘Do you accept Citibank credit cards?’ I opened my wallet.

‘It’s fine, send me a cheque later,’ she said. ‘You should have eloped.’

‘We thought we will win our parents over. Where’s the joy of getting married if your parents won’t smile on your wedding day?’ I said.

She came to me and patted my shoulder.

‘You have to leave. So, what do I do now? Do you want pills?’ she said.

‘You mean anti-depressants? Aren’t they bad for you?’

‘Yeah but depends on how bad you feel right now. I don’t want you googling for suicide recipes.’

‘I won’t,’ I said, ‘I’ll probably wither away anyway. Is there another option apart from pills?’

‘There’s therapy, sessions like this. It takes a few months though. I can try and find a therapist for you in Delhi.’

‘No, if my Punjabi family finds out, I’m done. They’ll say I am mental or something.’

‘You’re not. But you know, there is one thing you can try yourself.’

‘What?’

‘When you told me your story, why did you mention that episode with Guruji?’

‘At the Aurobindo Ashram?’

‘Yes, it didn’t really have a connection with Ananya or her parents. But you remember everything he said.’

‘Yes about forgiveness.’

‘Yes, maybe it had some significance,’ she said.

I kept quiet. The clock in her room told me it was time for my return journey. I took her leave.

‘Airport, vegamaa,’ I said as I hailed an auto.

57

I knew I had to eat, my brain knew this, but my body wouldn't hear of it. The day after returning from Chennai, I only had soup at office; at home I pretended I'd already had dinner. My mother asked me when I wanted to shave. She wanted to schedule a meeting with a new girl. I told her I had decided to keep a beard for the rest of my life. She made a face and left the room.

My father came home at ten. He looked extra tired. His normally tucked in shirt was out, and his hair wasn't neatly combed as usual. He sat in front of me.

'I've eaten dinner' he told my mother.

'I don't know why I even cook,' my mother grumbled as she left the room.

'You came back late last night,' my father said to me. I had reached home only at the midnight from the airport.

'I had to work late,' I said.

'Everything OK?' he said.

I nodded.

'I had a really bad day,' my father said. 'My pension papers are stuck in government offices. Bloody lazy buggers.'

I nodded without paying attention. My thoughts were all over the place, but none in his department. I felt immense longing and loathing for Ananya at the same time. I felt resentment towards my mother. My own problems, at least in my mind, were far bigger than some retirement files stuck in a government office.

'Now they have asked me to submit three different letters. I have to get them typed tomorrow,' my father said.

When my father had to suffer, he forgot his own vocation – of making others suffer. He hadn't shouted once since he had come home.

'Do you know a place where I can get letters typed? You have a computer, no?'
my father said.

'Yes, I do,' I said.

My father continued to look at me expectantly.

'OK, I'll type them now and get a printout from office tomorrow,' I said. I
anyway wanted more work to distract myself. I opened my laptop.

'Thank you,' he said, words we did not know lived inside of him.

I wrote his three applications in the next thirty minutes.

'How's your friend? He said to me.

'Which friend?' I said.

'The girl who came from Chennai to attend the wedding,' he said.

The mention of Ananya was enough to stir up my emotions. I felt like someone
had punched me back in the stomach. Maybe I should take those anti-depression
pills, I thought.

'I don't know. Must be fine,' I said after a minute's pause.

'You are not in touch with her?'

'Everyone had busy lives, dad,' I dismissed. 'Your letters are done. I'll get a
printout tomorrow.' I shut down my computer.

'It is good that we talk sometimes,' my father said.

'Good night, dad' I said and left for my room.

I lay in bed and that is when the depression hit me full force. Dr Iyer was right,
no pill could be as bad for me as I felt right now. I lay motionless. I felt like I'd
never be able to get out of bed again. I thought of every person in my life. One by
one, I convinced myself how each of them hated me. If I were gone tomorrow,
they'd all be happier. And considering how crappy I felt, there was no reason for
me to stick around anyway. I had no one I could talk to about my situation, except
five hundred bucks an hour. I hated money, I hated Citibank, I hated my job and I

hated all human beings on earth.

Calm down, Krish, this is going to pass, I told myself. This was the sensible me talking. ***No baby, this time you are so fucked. This is how you will feel for the rest of your life***, the freaked-out me said. ***That's nonsense. Whatever crap happens in life, tone gets used to it. You aren't the first guy facing a break-up***, sensible-me said. ***Yes, but nobody loves the way I do. So, nobody feels as hurt as I do***, freaked-out me said. ***Yeah, right***, sensible-me said and yawned, ***can we sleep? You know you need to.***

Are you crazy? How can you sleep when we can stay up all night and worry about this the freaked-out me said.

The world's most sensible person and the biggest idiot both stay within us. The worst part is, you can't even tell who is who.

58

'Where's dad?' I asked my mother, 'He hasn't told me how many copies he wants.'

Though I sat for breakfast before going to office, I drank only a glass of milk. Solids were still indigestible. I wanted to rush to work and occupy my mind before it sank into its black-hole hell again.

'Morning walk,' my mother said.

'Why doesn't he keep a mobile?' I said as I wore my shoes to leave for office.

'Get four copies of each, worst case,' my mother said.

It wasn't a big deal. However, it didn't take a lot to piss me off these days.

'Like I have nothing better to do in office,' I said.

'All you grumpy people in the house, please leave,' my mother said and folded her hands. 'I don't know when you will forget her.'

'I don't know when you'll end your drama,' I said.

'This girl....' my mother started.

'Bye,' I said hurriedly and sprinted out of the house.

I came late at night. I had stuck to juice and milk all day.

'Again no dinner? Where are you eating these days, and look at you, so weak. And please shave,' my mother said.

'Is dad back?' I said, 'Here are his papers.'

I took out the printouts and kept them on the table. My mother shook her head and told me that he hadn't come all day.

'Please, give these to him,' I said.

I went to my room and lay down in bed. Scared of black-hole land, I kept the

lights on. I read the newspaper, paying extra attention to each article to keep my mind busy. An item girl with her picture in a bikini said she wanted to be taken seriously. I found her request quite reasonable.

My father returned at midnight.

‘You think this is a hotel?’ I said as I opened the door. I hadn’t fought with him for weeks, so it was about time anyway.

My father didn’t respond.

‘Here are your printouts. I didn’t know how many copies you’d need.’

‘Thanks,’ my father said.

‘Where do you go so late? Your real estate agency work can’t take this long,’ I said.

‘I am not answerable to you,’ my father said.

‘And that is why we are an officially fucked-up family,’ I said.

I came back to my room. I slammed the door shut as I prepared for another night with the devils in my head. I promised myself to call Dr Iyer in the morning and get a prescription for those happy drugs. Fuck the side effects, I couldn’t take the mind monsters anymore.

I fell semi-asleep at three in the night. Persistent rings woke me up. I checked my watch; 5 a.m. Who the hell was calling at this hour?

I woke up groggy with a headache already in place. I reached the living room. I picked up the phone, ready to scream at the milkman or whoever else felt it was OK to call now.

‘Hello,’ a female voice said.

‘Ananya?’ I said. I knew that voice too well.

‘Thanks sweetie, thank you so much,’ Ananya said. Had she dialed the right number?

‘What?’ I said, still not fully in my senses.

'You fixed everything. Thank you so much,' she said, her voice super-excited.

'What did I do?' I blinked sleepily.

'Don't pretend! You should have at least told me.'

'Told you what?'

'That your dad is coming up to Chennai,' Ananya said.

'What?' I said and woke up in an instant.

'Stop behaving like a dumbo. He spent seven hours with my parents yesterday. He assured them that I would be treated like a daughter and apologised for any past misgivings.'

'My dad?' I tried for clarification.

'Yeah, my parents feel so much better after meeting him. In fact, they asked me if I have a date in mind. Can you imagine?' Ananya spoke so fast, it was hard to catch her words.

'Huh, really?' I said.

'Oh wake up properly and call me. I love you, baby. Sorry about the day before, I'd been so disturbed.'

'Me too,' I said.

'What? You too love me or you too are disturbed.'

'Both,' I said, 'but wait, my dad came to your house?'

'You seriously didn't know.'

'No,' I said.

'Wow,' she said, 'please thank him from my side.'

I went to my parents' room. They were still asleep. I don't know why, but I did a totally sappy thing. I slid right into the middle and put an arm around them both. In a minute, I was fast asleep.

I woke up five hours later, at ten. My parents were not in the room. I sprang out

of bed, panicking at how late I was for office. I came outside.

‘Where’s dad?’ I said as I saw my mother.

‘In the balcony,’ my mother said.

My father sat on a chair, digging up mud in one of the flower pots. He saw me but kept quiet. I wondered what I should say to him. I picked up another spade and started digging with him.

‘Dad, you went to Chennai?’

‘News travels fast,’ he said. He didn’t look up from the flower pot.

‘Why? I mean, how come?’

‘My son needed help,’ my father said as he pulled out the weeds from the soil. His voice had been plain, yet I felt a lump in my throat.

He placed a sapling in the pot and put freshly dug mud around it. I came and sat next to him and pressed the soil with my thumb.

‘How did you know?’ I said.

His eyes met mine, he said, ‘Because I am your father. A bad father, but I am still your father.’

He continued, ‘And even though you feel I have let you down in the past, I felt I should do my bit this time. A life partner is important. Ananya is a nice girl. You shouldn’t lose her.’

‘Thanks, dad,’ I said, fighting back tears.

‘You’re welcome,’ he said. He gave me a hug. ‘I’m not perfect. But don’t deprive me of my son in my final years,’ he said.

I hugged him back. Tears slipped out as I let go of any self-control. The world celebrates children and their mother, but we need fathers too.

I closed my eyes. I remembered Guruji. I stood on top of a green mountain, watching a beautiful sunrise. As I held my father, the heavy cloak fell off, making me feel light again.

'I won't come for the wedding though,' my father said.

'Why?' I said surprised.

'Your mother won't go without her relatives. I don't know what I will do there if they are there.'

'You won't come for your own son's wedding?' I said.

'Ananya is coming to our home only,' my father said.

I felt too much gratitude towards him at that moment to be mad at him.

'You have to come. I'm late for work, but I'll convince you later,' I said.

59

‘Like I said, much simpler for us if you get your relatives to Chennai,’ Ananya said.

‘How do I get them all? I can’t afford so many air tickets,’ I said.

We were on our countless pre-nuptial calls.

‘They won’t fly down themselves?’ Ananya said.

‘Are you crazy? We have to take care of the baraat, until they reach you, of course.’

‘Only you understand these Punjabi customs,’ Ananya said.

‘You’d better too,’ I said.

‘It’s a Tamil style wedding,’ Ananya said.

‘What?’ I said.

‘Yeah, what else do you expect in Chennai? Anyway, won’t your relatives like to see something different?’

‘Actually, no,’ I said.

‘We’ll see, and you can take the train to Chennai. The Rajdhani Express takes twenty-eight hours.’

‘That’s a long ride with relatives,’ I said.

‘You’ve waited so long for this, what’s another day?’ Ananya said and ended the call.

‘You really won’t come? I have your tickets.’

My father kept silent. My mother sat next to me at the dining table.

‘Why does it have to be a choice? Why can’t mom get her relatives and you come as well?’ I said. Why can’t we be a normal family for once? I thought. I guess there are no normal families in the world. Everyone is a psycho, and the average of all psychos is what we call normal.

‘He feels they have insulted him in the past,’ my mother said.

‘And he hasn’t insulted them?’ I said, ‘Anyway, what does it have to do with my wedding? Dad, say something.’

‘You have my blessings. Don’t expect my presence,’ my father said.

‘His drama never ends,’ my mother said. ‘He himself went to Chennai and said yes to Madrasis. This wouldn’t even have happened otherwise. Now when everyone in my family is waiting for the wedding, he stops them. Why? Because he can’t see them happy. Most of all, he doesn’t want to see me happy.’ She then broke into tears.

‘Is that the case, dad?’

‘No, I’ve given you a choice,’ he said.

‘Which son will not want his father to come?’ my mother said, ‘This is not a choice. This is blackmail.’

‘Whatever you want to call it. If this wedding is happening because of me, then I should get to choose the guests.’

‘No dad,’ I said, ‘Mom has equal rights, too. Unfortunately, I belong to both of you.’

‘So, you decide’ my father said.

My mother and dad looked at me. I paced up and down the room for ten minutes.

‘Dad, mom’s family has to come. You do what you have to do,’ I said and left the

room.

Rajji mama had arranged a two-man dholak band at the Hazrat Nizamuddin station. I helped locate the thirty-seven II-tier AC berths reserved for my relatives in the Rajdhani Express compartment. Two of my mother's cousins had decided to join at the last minute and we had to accommodate them as well. My mother made up a wonderful story about my father's viral fever that would be malaria. Everyone knew the reality, and apart from the awkwardness of fibbing to Ananya's parents again, people were relieved, as my dad equaled to no fun.

'You can't talk half the things when your husband is here,' as Shipra masi told my mother.

I stood inside the bogie, matching everyone's ticket to their berth. Rajji mama dragged me out. 'You have to dance a little, no? This is that baraat leaving,' he said.

At four in the afternoon, hundreds of bored passengers on the platform watched the free entertainment provided by our family. The dholak men jogged along the train and argued with mama over the payment. They couldn't squeeze much out of him as the train has picked up speed.

I came inside my compartment, which the ladies had turned into a sari shop. The entire lower berths were filled with the dresses everyone planned to wear for each of the functions.

'This is beautiful,' my seventy-year-old distant aunt said as she fondled a magenta sari with real gold-work. Women never get too old for admiring saris.

My younger cousins had taken over the next compartment. The girls had their make-up kits open. They discussed sharing the mascaras. I see why whole families get excited about a wedding; there's something in it for everyone.

I came outside to stand at the compartment door. The train whizzed past Agra, Gwalior and Jhansi over the next few hours. I still had a day to go as the train traversed through this huge country, cutting through states I had battled for the last year. These states make up our nation. These states also divide our nation.

And in some cases, these states play havoc in our love lives.

I came inside when the train reached Bhopal at dinnertime. My relatives couldn't contain their excitement that Rajdhani Express offered free meals.

'Take non-veg, the Madrasis won't give you any,' Shipra masi advised everyone.

'OK aunty, for the next three days, there are no Madrasis, only Tamilians,' I said.

Shipra masi separated the foil from her chicken. 'Yes, yes, I know. Tamil Nadu is a state. But we are going to Madras only, no? Why does the ticket say Chennai?'

'It's the same. Like Delhi and Dilli,' Kamla mami said as she slurped her chicken sweet corn soup.

'Is it true their chief minister is an ex-film heroine?' my mother's cousin said.

'Yes-ji,' another aunt said, 'these South Indian women are quite clever.'

'God has given them a brain, nothing else,' came another loose comment and I considered jumping off the train.

60

Ananya's father checked my clan into twenty rooms at the Sangeetha Residency in Mylapore. The rooms were basic, but clean and air-conditioned. 'What happened to your father? We just met him,' he asked.

'It's a viral fever that could become malaria,' I said.

'Is that possible?'

'It happens in Delhi. Anyway, what's the schedule?' I regulated the conversation.

'We have a puja tomorrow afternoon and another one in the evening. The wedding muhurtam will be in the morning day after tomorrow,' he said.

'Uncle, what about a DJ? There is no party?' I was aghast for my kith and kin.

'We have a reception party day after evening. Have your fun there,' he said and turned to my mother, 'Kavita jee, Shipra jee, can I talk to you for a second?'

My mother, Shipra masi and Ananya's father stepped away from me and other relatives. They spoke for five minutes. My mother rejoined me. Shipra masi went to the reception to collect her keys.

'What?' I said as we climbed up the steps towards our hotel rooms.

'Nothing,' my mother said.

'It's my marriage. I deserve to know.'

'They asked me if I wanted a special gift,' my mother said. Perhaps, Ananya had recounted Minti's wedding to her parents.

'And? What did you say?' I said, eyeing my mother with suspicion.

'Don't talk to me in that voice,' my mother said.

'What exactly did you say, mom?' I said, my tone worse, 'what? Did you send him to buy a car or split ACs or what?'

‘That’s what you think of me. Don’t you?’ my mother said as we reached the first floor. She paused to catch her breath.

Shipra masi’s expensive sandals could be heard four seconds before she arrived the first floor.

‘See this stupid sister of mine. She said no to any big gifts,’ Shipra masi said to me.

‘You did?’ I said to my mother.

My mother looked at me.

‘You will never understand how much I love you,’ my mother said.

I hung my head in shame. My mother smacked the back of my head. I deserved a slap.

Shipra masi waved her hands as she spoke.

‘You and your mother, both the same – impractical. She tells him, “I sent my son to do one MBA, I am getting two MBAs in return. Ananya is the best gift,”’ Shipra masi said, ‘OK, she earns a lot, but Kavita, why say no if someone is ready to give. Why not grab it.’

‘Because we are not that kind of people, Shipra masi,’ I said and gave my mother a hug, ‘she is all talk. But she can never behave like Duke’s mother. Never,’ I said.

I came into my hotel room where ten cousins, six aunts and four uncles sat on my bed. I sat on the floor as space was at a premium. We had twenty rooms to choose from, but my relatives would rather be cramped together than miss out on juicy gossip session.

The younger cousins battled for the TV remote. I repeated the schedule to my aunts.

‘They are big bores. How can they do puja the whole day?’ Kamla mami said.

‘They don’t even have sangeet?’ my mother said.

'I think they are trying to save money,' Shipra masi said.

'What language will the pujas be in? Madrasi? Another aunt said.

'Tamil, maybe Sanskrit,' I said.

'I am not coming,' my mother said.

I glared at my mother.

'Where do we eat?' an aunt expressed everyone's concern.

'The meals are in the dining hall at the wedding venue. Let's go to bed, we have to wake up early,' I said.

We had planned to meet in the hotel lobby at seven-thirty in the morning. We only left at nine.

'What is the address?' Rajji mama said.

I took out the piece of paper Ananya's dad had given me.

'I can't read this,' Rajji mama said.

I took the paper back. It said:

Arulmigu Kapaleeswarar Karpagambal Thirumana Mandapam

16, Venkatesa Agraharam Street, Mylapore, Chennai

After three attempts of reading it, I had a headache. I counted the letters, my wedding venue had fifty alphabets in it. Delhi never gets this complicated. One of my older cousins had her wedding in Batra Banquets, another one in Bawa Hall.

We struggled for twenty minutes on the streets of Mylapore before we reached the venue. Fortunately, the locals had abbreviated the name of the place to AKKT Mandapam. From actors to political parties to wedding halls, Tamilians love to keep complicated names first and then make acronyms for the same.

'What do you mean breakfast is finished?' Shipra masi said.

'Illa, illa,' a pot-bellied, dark-complexioned, hirsute chef said and shook his hand. He wore a lungi and a chef's cap. If he wore the cap no prevent hair in the food,

he needed a body sheath, given his hairy arms and chest.

‘Orunimishum,’ I said ‘what happened?’

‘Your son speaks Tamil?’ Shipra masi said to my mother.

My mother rolled her eyes.

‘No, I don’t. It’s a common word for wait a second,’ I said.

‘Now he belongs to them. They’ll make him do anything,’ my mother lamented loudly.

‘Mom, please. Let me resolve this,’ I said.

‘What will you resolve? They will make us cook food also,’ my mother said.

‘Everybody, please sit in the dining hall,’ I said then turned to the chef. ‘Can’t you make something?’

‘Who will make tiffin then? We have to serve it at eleven,’ the chef said.

I checked my watch. It was nine-thirty. My family would have medical emergencies if kept hungry for that long.

‘We want something now,’ I said, ‘anything quick.’

‘What about tiffin?’ the chef said.

‘We don’t want tiffin. We’ll only come back for lunch later.’

‘Girl’s side wants tiffin. They came for breakfast at 6.30,’ the chef said.

Rajji mama came up to me. ‘Bribe him,’ he whispered.

I thought about the ethics of bribing at my own wedding to feed myself.

‘Wokay, I go now, I am busy,’ the chef said and mumbled to himself, ‘pundai maganey, thaayoli koodhi.’

‘Anna, wait,’ I said.

The chef looked at me in amazement. How can a person with a heavy Delhi accent toss in a Tamil word or two?

I kept a hundred-rupee note in my hand and shook hands with him. Perplexed, he examined the currency.

‘We are giving you out of happiness,’ my uncle said.

‘I can make upma fast,’ the chef said.

‘What is upma?’ my uncle said.

‘Salty halwa. No, not upma. Can you make dosas?’ I said.

‘For dosa one by one making no staff now. Then lunch also delayed,’ the chef said mournfully.

We settled on idlis. There would be no sambhar. However, the chef had drum full of coconut chutney, enough to pave roads with.

My family sat in the dining hall as servers placed banana leaves in front of them.

‘We have to eat leaves?’ Shipra masi said, ‘What are we? Cows?’

‘It’s the plate,’ I said, ‘and there is no cutlery.’

‘They have hardly any expense in weddings, how lucky,’ Kamla aunty said.

Forty of us consumed at least two hundred idlis.

Ananya’s father came when we had finished. ‘There wasn’t breakfast? I am sorry,’ he said.

‘It’s fine,’ I said, ‘We came late.’

‘Hello, Kavita-ji,’ Ananya’s father said with folded hands, as per Ananya’s instructions. He took the bucket of idli from the servers and served one to my mother.

‘Hello,’ my mother responded, a hint of pride in her voice as her sibilings saw her being served by the girl’s father. This is what grown-ups live for anyway, considering they have so little fun otherwise.

‘How’s Krish’s father feeling now?’ Ananya’s father said next.

‘He’s better, he had soup last night and porridge in the morning. He is taking rest now. He sends his regards,’ my mother said.

Ananya’s father nodded in concern.

‘What are the ceremonies today, uncle?’ I asked for my relatives benefit.

‘First we have the *Vrutham*, the wedding invitation prayers. We also have *Nischayartham*, the formal engagement ceremony where we set the auspicious time for the wedding and give gifts to close relatives,’ Ananya’s father said.

My aunts only paid attention to the last four words.

We came to the main hall, the center of action for the next two days. Every ceremony of my wedding took place in this room. In the middle of the hall, there was fire urn, not too different from Punjabi weddings. However, in our weddings people only came around the fire after eating their dinner and dessert. Here, everyone lived around the fire. I sat down on the floor. Four priests started the mantras. Close relatives sat on the floor while distant and arthritic ones sat on chairs in the back rows. The priests at the *Vrutham* chanted so loud, it scared some of my little cousins into crying and made it impossible to talk. My aunts behind me shifted their positions several times.

‘Should we do a city tour later?’ Kamla aunty said.

‘What is there to see in Chennai? If you want to see Madras, there are enough in this room,’ Shipra masi said.

I saw Ananya’s relatives. I recognized few aunts. The younger cousins had come down from abroad. They sat in traditional Tamil attire, clutching their mineral water bottles.

‘Ananya didi,’ Minti said as Ananya came inside. She wore a maroon Kanjeevaram sari with a mustard yellow-gold border. Her tightly braided hair made her look like a cute schoolgirl. Her face had make up, and Ananya looked prettier than any girl on any Tamil film poster ever made. Her eyes looked deep, due to kaajal around it. For a few seconds I couldn’t recognize her as my Ananya.

Was this the same girl I met in the mess line fighting for sambhar?

Our eyes met briefly. She gave me a little smile, enquiring on how she looked.

I nodded, yes she looked more beautiful than she ever had.

The prayers continued for another hour. Smoke filled the room. The priests kept adding twigs and spoonfuls of ghee to the fire. Ananya and I exchanged glances and smiled several times. ***Was it really happening? Was I finally getting married, with consent from everyone I shared my DNA with?***

The priest asked for my father. My mother told him he was unwell.

I thought of dad again. ***Why are adults so stuck up?***

‘What’s your grandparents’ village?’ Ananya’s dad asked me. There priests required it for the ***Nischayathartham*** ceremony.

I had no idea. I turned to my mother. She turned to my aunts. My aunts debated what answer to give them.

‘Lahore,’ my mother said, after their discussion.

‘Lahore in Pakistan?’ Ananya’s father said.

He seemed worried; I was scared he’d change his mind again.

‘My grandparents had come to Delhi after the partition,’ I explained to him.

He nodded.

‘Uncle, when is the marriage done? Like it is irreversible and no one can object to it afterwards?’

‘What do you mean?’ he said.

‘Nothing,’ I said as the priest called me to make a donation.

I gave him a hundred-rupee note. He declined it with full fervor.

‘Don’t give him directly, put it in the ***thamboolam***,’ Ananya’s father said, referring to the puja plates.

I placed the money in the plate. I decorated it with a banana, paan leaves and

betel nut. I offered it again and the priest accepted it. He announced the wedding details - the non-abbreviated name of the venue, the lagnam, the star and tomorrow's date.

'Six-thirty muhurtam,' the priest said.

'In the morning?' Rajji mama said, shocked.

Ananya's relatives congratulated each other on the formal setting of the time. My relatives were aghast.

'This is a wedding or a torture? It's like catching an early morning flight,' Kamla aunty said.

Fortunately, Ananya's mother calmed the ladies by bringing in ten bags full of gifts.

'Mrs Kamla,' she announced, reading out from the first bag. Each gift had the receiver's name, relationship with me and a code word for what was inside.

'Me,' Kamla aunty said and raised her hand like a child marking attendance in class. There's something about presents that turns everyone into kids.

'We'll open them in our hotel,' Shipra masi said after the end of the prize distribution ceremony.

'And now, we will have lunch,' Ananya's father said, inviting us all to the dining hall to a meal of rice, sambhar, rasam, vegetables, curd and payasam.

'We're trapped. No paneer here,' Kamla aunty said as we moved to the paneer-less dining hall.

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‘So what’s the plan for tonight?’ Rajji mama said after we came back to the hotel.

‘There is dinner at the dining hall at eight,’ I said.

‘Please, I can’t have any more rice,’ Shipra masi said. The ladies had opened their Kanjeevaram sari gifts. I had told Ananya to leave the price tags on. My relatives praised Ananya a little more as they noticed each sari cost three thousand bucks.

‘What’s after dinner?’ Rajji mama said.

‘The muhurtam is six-thirty. Let’s sleep early.’

‘See Kavita, how your son has become a Madrasi,’ Kamla aunty said and everyone laughed like she had cracked the best joke in the world.

I made a face.

‘How can we sleep early? It is your wedding,’ Kamla aunty pulled my cheeks.

‘So, what do you want to do?’ I said.

‘We’ll organize a party. Minti’s daddy, come let’s go,’ Kamla aunty said and they went out.

‘And you go the beauty parlour to get a facial,’ my mother said.

‘Me?’

‘Yes, but be careful. The beauty parlours can make you black,’ Shipra masi said and my clan found another reason to guffaw like Punjabis can.

I can’t really call the party Rajji mama organized for me as a bachelor’s party, especially since all my aunts were present. However, the makeshift arrangements gave it a single-guy-bash feel. Rajji mama had come back with two bottles of whisky, one bottle of vodka and a crate of beer. Kamla aunty also brought chips and juice for the ladies.

‘Let the ladies also have a drink tonight,’ Rajji mama proclaimed as many

aunties feigned horror. My cousins had already booked the vodka bottle.

‘Ice,’ Rajji mama told a waiter at the hotel and gave him hundred bucks. He returned with a bucketful.

‘You have a music system?’ Rajji mama asked the waiter. The waiter agreed to borrow one from his friend for another hundred bucks. The choice of music was a challenge though, and we had to limit ourselves to the soundtracks of the movies *Roja* and *Gentleman*. The lyrics were Tamil but at least the tunes were familiar.

‘After two drinks, you will be able to understand the Tamil words also,’ Rajji mama said.

The men took Room 301, my room. The women went to 302, while the teenage and young cousins were in 303. The under-thirteens stayed in 304, watching cartoon channels on cableTV. The under-fives and over seventy-fives were cooped up in 305, the latter babysitting the former.

Rajji mama kept shuttling from 301 to 302, to gossip with the ladies and discuss stocks and real estate with the men in 301.

‘It’s eleven,’ I reminded my relatives, ‘We should sleep,’

‘Oh, shut up,’ Rajji mama said and hugged me happily. ‘If we sleep now, we won’t wake up at all. Let’s keep going until morning.’

The party continued and rooms 301,302 and 303 turned into discos. The *Indian* soundtrack was played five times. I realized if my relatives didn’t sleep, we may never make it to the wedding. I went down to the lobby at half past midnight.

‘Call the cops,’ I told the front desk.

‘What?’ the manager said, ‘You are the groom.’

‘Yes, and I have a six-thirty muhurtham. I need to be there at five with all of them. There are in no mood to rest.’

The manager laughed. Rajji mama had bribed him well. ‘Don’t worry, sir, I will stop them in half an hour.’

A car stopped outside the hotel just then and a person stepped out. Even in the darkness I could tell who it was. I immediately sprinted up the stairs, my heart beating fast. Rajji mama was close-dancing with Kamla aunty in 302 to a sad song from *Roja*

‘My dad’s here,’ I announced.

In two minutes flat, our nightclubs shut down as if there was a police raid. Everyone went into their rooms to sleep. The corridor was stark silent as my dad climbed up to the third floor.

‘Dad,’ I said.

We looked at each other for a few seconds. He had decided to come, after all. I couldn’t think beyond that fact. I didn’t push him for a reason either. He was like me; we Indian men don’t do emotions too well.

‘You haven’t slept? Aren’t you getting married in a few hours?’ he asked mildly.

I didn’t respond. He walked towards 301. I stopped him. The last thing I wanted him to see was the debauchery of my maternal uncles.

‘There are more rooms upstairs. This one needs repairs,’ I said and took him to the next floor. I left him there to change. My mother was in 301, trying to clean it as fast as possible.

‘It’s fine, he is upstairs,’ I said.

‘What’s he doing here?’ my mother said, ‘He’s come to create trouble?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘He’s fine. He came to attend my wedding.’

‘Now? He has come now?’

‘It’s OK, mom, you go to bed. I’ll tell him you are asleep,’ I said I kissed my mother on the cheek and went up.

My father had changed into a white kurta pajama.

‘Thank you, dad,’ I said.

‘Don’t be silly,’ he said. ‘Where’s your mother?’

'Everyone slept early. We have to wake up at four,' I said.

'Oh, I'm keeping you up. Are you sleeping here?'

I nodded and switched off the lights. I lay down next to only him, probably for the first time in twenty years.

'I love you, son,' he said, his eyes closed.

I choked up. The words meant as much as to me as when Ananya had said them the first time.

'I love you too,' I said, and wondered which love story I was really chasing anyway.

62

I had to pour mugfuls of water over their face to wake up my relatives. Rajji mama had a severe hangover. I had slept only three hours and had a splitting headache. We asked room service for triple strength coffee.

‘This is inhuman, how can they get married at this time?’ my mother said. She opened her suitcase to take out her new sari for the occasion.

Ananya’s father had sent a bus to our hotel for the two-hundred-metre journey. I waited outside while every female in my clan blow-dried hair and applied lipstick. Panic calls started at five-fifteen.

‘The priests had lit the fire. Chants have begun,’ Ananya’s father said.

‘Two more old ladies, coming real soon,’ I said and hung up the phone.

We reached the mandapam at five-thirty. Ananya’s relatives had already taken the best seats. I waded through them to sit in front of the priests.

‘The mother sits here,’ the priest said, ‘and if the father is not there then a senior male relative...’

‘My father is here,’ I said.

Ananya’s parents sprang up from their seats. ‘Welcome,’ Ananya’s father said, ‘How is your fever?’

‘What fever?’ my father said as he took his place.

The priests continued their fervent chants. Rajji mama passed on Saridon strips as everyone with a hangover took a pill. Ananya’s uncles passed copies of *The Hindu* to each other as they continued to gather knowledge through the wedding.

‘Come, Krish,’ Ananya’s father said after five minutes of prayers.

‘What?’

‘You have to change. I am supposed to help you’ he said matter-of-factly.

I had worn a new rust-colored silk kurta pajama my mother had bought for me. ‘This doesn’t work?’ I said.

Ananya giggled. Ananya’s father shook his head and stood up. I followed him to the room next to the main hall. He ominously bolted the door. ‘Take off your clothes,’ he said.

‘What?’ I said as he fingered my kurta’s hem to help me take it off.

‘I will do it myself,’ I said hastily. I removed my kurta.

‘Pajama also,’ he said, reminding me of my college ragging days.

‘Is this necessary?’ I snapped, wondering if my strip-tease would make the mantras more effective.

He didn’t respond. His hands were about to reach my pajama cord when I decided to get rid of my modesty myself. I had worn a white underwear with Mickey Mouses prancing all over it.

‘Why are you wearing... this?’

I had brought a pack of six Disney-themed underwear. Considering I was going to get married and Ananya like cartoon characters, I had thought she’d find it cute. Of course, I couldn’t give this reason to my future father-in-law.

‘How was I to know it will be on display?’ I said.

Ananya’s dad had worried expression.

‘Why, what’s wrong?’ I said.

‘You have to wear this veshti,’ Ananya’s dad said and gave to me a translucent cream-colored lungi. It resembled the bathing dress worn by Mandakini in ***Ram Teri Ganga Maili***.

‘I have to wear this? How?’ I held it up. The early morning rays came right through it.

‘Come, I’ll show you,’ Ananya’s dad said, and horror of horrors, tucked half his

hand into my underwear. I wondered if a groom can sue his father-in-law for molestation.

‘Please, let me try first,’ I said. Of course, out of nervousness I couldn’t focus. The veshti kept slipping and I stood there in my Mickey Mouse underwear, almost in tears.

‘Allow me, it will take only a minute,’ Ananya’s father said gently, like a doctor convincing a kid for an injection.

I closed my eyes. ***This is the absolute last, last humiliation I will go through to get the love of my life,*** I thought. A few hours more and this will be over. Uncle’s hand came close for comfort as he tried to ensure a snug fit. Some say this ceremony is designed to ensure that the groom has his equipment in place. Well, he surely did a good job finding out.

‘Are we done?’ I said as uncle adjusted the final pleats.

I saw myself in the mirror. My first topless meeting with the world was about to take place. Little Mickey Mouses were grinning through my Translucent veshti. OK, it is only for a little while more, I told myself.

‘See, now all your wedding pictures will have Mickey Mouse,’ uncle said, confirming that my humiliation would continue for the rest of my life.

‘Do you want to change your underwear? You can wear mine. Should we exchange? He asked.

I looked at him, wondering if he actually said what he just said. ‘Let’s go. I have to get married.’

We came outside and my cousins burst into laughter when they saw me.

‘Mickey Mouse,’ my five-year-old cousin screamed, ensuring that all guests would now freely spot it.

Ananya sat in a gorgeous nine-yard dark silk sari. She wore diamond and gold necklaces. She looked like an accessible goddess.

‘What’s with the underwear?’ she whispered to me.

'I bought it for you I mean us,' I said.

'Excuse me?' she said as the priest scolded us for talking and asked to focus on the prayers. Someone tied a scarf over my eyes so I couldn't see anything for ten minutes as prayers continued. It could be the punishment for talking to the bride during the wedding, but no one explained why. Prayers continued even after the scarf was removed.

'OK, now you go for Kashi Yatra,' the priest said after an hour. He gave me an umbrella and a copy of the Gita.

'What's that?' I said.

Ananya's father gave me the details. I had to stand up and announce I wasn't interested in the wedding and was going to Kashi, or Varanasi, to become a sadhu. I didn't know why they gave me an umbrella, but I had to open it and place it over my head as I walked out. Ananya's father would come after me and convince me that I should marry his daughter instead.

I decided to do an extra good job with this ceremony, especially as I had messed up with the veshti. I stood up, gave Ananya's parents a disgusted look and sprinted out of the hall. Ananya's father followed me but I walked way faster than him. I came to the main road outside the hall. I walked on to the street. An auto saw me and came near me.

'Where, where? He said, his engine still sputtering in first gear.

'Kashi,' I said.

'Kashi where?' he said.

'Varanasi, in U.P.,' I said.

'Central Station? Seventy rupees, sir,' he said.

I turned over and saw Ananya's dad twenty metres behind me. Well, you only get married once, so I decided to do the best Kashi Yatra ceremony ever.

I sat inside the auto. The auto sped off.

‘Hey,’ Ananya’s dad screamed at full volume.

‘Who’s that?’ the auto driver said.

‘Nothing,’ I said, ‘stop.’

I came out of the auto, Ananya’s father came running to me.

‘What are you doing?’ he said, panting after the jog.

‘Going to Kashi,’ I said and smiled, ‘you didn’t tell me when to stop.’

He grabbed my arm tight. ‘Come inside,’ he said, dragging me towards the mandapam.

‘Hey, aren’t you supposed to convince me?’ I said.

We had some more Tamil ceremonies. We had *Maalai Maatral*, which involved an exchange of garlands like the Punjabi jaimala. However, Ananya’s relatives lifted her high, making it difficult for me to reach her head. My own relatives took a while to realise that it was only a game and almost got into a fight with one of Ananya’s uncles. After that, we had *Oonjal* where Ananya and I sat on a swing as her relatives fed us small pieces of banana soaked in milk. Finally, we came back to sit around the fire. Ananya sat on her father’s lap for the final *kanyadaan*.

‘Yes,’ I whispered to myself, ‘it’s almost over.’

Ananya and I held a coconut dipped in turmeric. Ananya’s mother poured water over it. Ananya couldn’t hold back her tears, sitting in her father’s lap. I tied a gold necklace with a flat rectangular pendant around her neck, called the taali, in the *Mangalyadharanam*.

The priests told us to stand up for the *Saptapathi*, or the seven sacred steps. Ananya’s sari and my veshti were connected in a knot and held hands. I had felt her touch after months.

‘Are you OK?’ I said as she sniffed.

‘You are not a girl, you won’t understand,’ Ananya said, and thus began a lifetime of ‘you won’t understand’ statements married men have to endure

everyday.

I placed my feet under Ananya's feet and helped her take seven steps around fire. I slipped silver rings onto her toes.

Everyone clapped as I came back up.

'What?' I said.

'It's over, now go around the room and take blessings from everyone,' the head priest said.

I looked at Mr Swami and his wife. They were no longer Ananya's parents. They were my in-laws. I had done it. The two states had become one.

'Do namaskaram,' the priest instructed us. Ananya and I lay fully flat on the ground in front of every elder relative to bless us. It is the only wedding ritual in the world that involves a workout.

'My blessings are always with you,' my father said as he stopped us from lying down fully in front of him.

'God bless you,' Shipra masi said as I lay down in front of her, 'But I'm sleepy. Let's go back to the hotel.'

'He has a speech?' I said. Ananya and I sat on regal chairs at the venue of our reception. At least this function felt familiar to my relatives as they saw food stalls in the open garden. We were at the Madras Boat Club. Coloured lights twined around the trees; the lakeside venue was a welcome change from the unpronounceable smoke-filled mandapam.

'Yeah, he wanted to do a powerpoint, but I stopped him. He even came to the hotel to show the speech to you.'

'When?' I said, 'I was there only.'

'Sleeping all day,' Ananya said. 'He only heard snores.'

'You didn't sleep?' I said.

'No way, we have so many out of town guests. I haven't slept for the last two days.'

'So, how do you manage to look so beautiful?' I said.

She blushed. It matched her clothes. She wore a pink lehnga with heavy gold and silver embroidery for the evening, a surprise for my relatives and a bit of shock for her own aunts. However, it was too late and Ananya was already married – to me. Screw you, Pure Harish, I thought, though I cursed myself for thinking of him at all.

'Congratulations,' some random person came to the stage to meet us and we smiled for pictures for the hundredth time.

Dinner did have North Indian choices, but the flavours were a bit off.

'They've made gobi aaloo with coconut oil,' Minti complained.

'We are all going back tomorrow,' I said. 'You'll have your paranthas soon. Now don't make a face and eat ice-cream.'

'When are we cutting the cake?' one of my younger cousins said, pointing to

the eggless cake kept in the middle of the garden. Next to the cake, there was a dais with chairs around it.

A waiter rang a hand-bell, announcing the speech and cake-cutting ceremony. Relatives came around and sat on chairs. The Tamilians and Punjabis looked at each other. People had not come to attend the wedding, they had come to a live human museum of the other community.

‘But when will the DJ start?’ my cousin said.

‘Patience,’ I said.

Ananya and I stood next to the cake. Ananya took the mike to speak first. ‘Thank you everyone for coming here. I am so grateful to all of you that you decided to share our happiness. Yes, ours is quite a different wedding, and it has taken us a while to get here, making it all the more special. I’d like my amazing father to share a few words with you.’

Ananay clapped and the rest of the crowd applauded as well.

My father and mother sat together with a smile on their face. At least for tonight, they’d decided to get along.

‘Hello, everyone,’ Ananya’s dad said, ‘I’d like someone from the boy’s side later to say a few words as well.’

He looked at my father. My father folded his hands to say no.

‘I’ll talk,’ Rajji mama said and raised his hand. He had obviously found the Boat Club bar.

‘Welcome everyone,’ Ananya’s father started, ‘I never liked giving speeches. However, in the last year, helped by my son-in-law, I’ve gained the confidence to talk in public.’

Everyone turned to look at me. OK, making office presentations is one thing, confessionals in front of your community quite another. I hoped he knew what he was doing.

‘I know the number one topic all of you have discussed in this party – why is

Swami marrying his daughter to a North Indian fellow? I know it, as we would have done the same.

Sniggers ran through the crowd.

‘In fact, when Ananya first told us about Krish, we were quite upset. As all Tamilians know, we are so proud of our own culture. We also thought our daughter is one in million, she will get the best of boys in our own community. Why must she go for a Punjabi boy?’

Everyone who wore a Kanjeevaram sari into the crowd nodded. The Punjabis kept a straight face.

‘We did our best to discourage her. We didn’t treat Krish well even though he moved to Chennai for us. We even showed her Tamil boys. But you know kids of today, they do what they want to do.’

This time all gave understanding nods.

‘So why do parents object to this?’ he said and adjusted his glasses. ‘It is not only about another community. It is the fact your daughter has found a boy herself. We as parents feel disobeyed, left out and disappointed. We bring our children up from babies to adults, how can they ignore us like this? All our frustration comes out in anger. How much we hate love marriages, isn’t it?’

Ananya’s aunts smiled.

‘But we forget that this has happened because your child had love to give to someone in this world. Is that such a bad thing? Where did the child learn to love? From us, after all, the person they loved first is you.’

Ananya clasped my arm and clenched it tight. The crowd listened with full attention.

‘Actually, the choice is simple. When your child decided to love a new person, you can either see it as a chance to hate some people – the person they choose and their families. Which is what we did for a while. However, you can also see it as a chance to love some more people. And since when did loving more people

become a bad thing?’

He paused to have a glass of water and continued. ‘Yes, the Tamilian in me is a little disappointed. But the Indian in me is quite happy. And more than anything, the human being in me is happy. After all, we’ve decided to use this opportunity to create more loved ones for ourselves.’

When he kept the mike down, Ananya hugged him hard. The crowd burst into applause. Ananya and I cut the cake through the resounding claps. We fed each other and our respective in-laws a piece. The cameraman gathered both sets of parents for a picture.

‘Ananya, see, both our parents. They are smiling,’ I said.

Rajji mama stood up and came to the mike for his speech.

‘Stop Minti’s daddy, he has had six pegs,’ Kamla aunty said.

Rajji mama took the mike and raised his hands. ‘ladies and gentleman,’ he said.

I went up to him.

‘Rajji mama, enough. You are too cool to make boring speeches,’ I whispered in his ear.

‘Really? We should answer them, no?’ he said.

‘It’s not a competition,’ I said.

He said into the mike, ‘Ladies and gentlemen of Tamil Nadu, thank you very much. Now we invite you to some Punjabi-style dancing with the DJ at the backside.’

My cousins flew off their chairs and surged towards the dance floor.

The song collection was a mixture of Tamil and Hindi film music. They had one Punjabi music CD, which Rajji mama had instructed to play in a loop. My family dominated the dance floor, but Ananya urged her aunts and uncles to join in as well. I guess they were my family too now.

Rajji mama avoided a bad fall while trying a particularly difficult Bhangra-break dance fusion step to impress my new relatives. My cousins pushed me and Ananya together for a close dance. I held Ananya to me as we moved on the dance floor.

‘Ananya,’ I whispered in her ear.

‘What?’ she said softly.

‘I love you and your father and your mother and your brother and your relatives,’ I said.

‘I love you and your clan, too,’ she said.

We kissed as Tamils and Punjabis danced around us.

‘So, the self-imposed exile is over now? You said we’ll only do it when we cross the finish line,’ I said.

‘Is that all you men think about?’ she said.

‘Only for the sake of uniting the nation,’ I said.

Epilogue

A couple of years later

'Do I have to be here?' I asked Ananya who lay in the delivery room. A curtain spread mid-way across the bed separated her lower and upper body. The doctors had given her a half-body anesthetic, which enabled her to stay awake during C-section. A team of specialists hid behind the curtain cutting up her stomach.

'He has a knife,' I said, peeping at the doctors. My head felt dizzy.

'Don't freak me out. Talk about something else,' she said. 'How's the book going?'

'Well, the fifth publisher rejected it yesterday,' I said and stood up again to take a peek. 'At least I can go to the sixth one now ... wow, there is blood.'

'Sit down if you can't handle the sight, and stop being so scared. I can't feel a thing because of the epidural,' she said. The doctor had recommended a caesarian without general anesthesia

'If only you could see,' I said, 'wow, I see a leg. It's like Aliens 3.'

'Shut up,' she said.

'Hey, it's a boy,' I said.

'Does he look like me?'

'I don't know. I haven't seen the face yet. I've only seen the you-know-what.'

The doctor took out the whole baby.

'Thank you, doctor, thank you so much,' I said emotionally and moved to shake his hand.

'Wait,' the doctor said through his masked face.

'What?' Ananya said.

'I don't know,' said. 'Oh wait, there's another leg. Wow, there's another boy.'

'Twins?' she said in disbelief, looking ready to faint.

'Yes,' the doctor said. 'Congratulations.'

The nurse cleaned up the two babies and gave them to me.

'Be careful,' she said as I took one in each arm.

'You are from two different states, right? So, what will be their state?' the nurse said and chuckled.

'They'll be from a state called India,' I said.

THE END

Act 3: Chennai

15

My flight landed in Chennai at 7 p.m. we had a six-hour delay in Delhi because a psycho called the airport and said the plane had a bomb. My bag took another hour to arrive on the conveyor belt. As I waited, I looked at the people around me. The first thing I noticed, excuse my shallowness was that almost ninety percent of the people were dark complexioned. Of these ninety percent, eighty percent had dabbed talcum that gave them a grey skin tone. I understood why Fair & Lovely was invented. I couldn't understand why people wanted to be fair so bad.

Most women at the conveyor belt looked like Ananya's mother; I couldn't tell one from the other. They all wore tones of gold, but somehow it looked more understated than Pammi aunty's necklaces that had precious stones and pearls hanging from them like shapeless dry fruits.

I came out of the airport. I had to find an auto to go to my chummery. I fumbled through my pockets to find the slip of paper with my new address. I couldn't find them in my jeans and almost panicked. I didn't know any place in Chennai except T. Nagar. And I knew t. Nagar as I took Brilliant Tutorials once upon a time. Somehow, I didn't think they'd shelter one of their lakh of students from eight years ago.

I opened my wallet and found my address. I heaved a sigh of relief. I came to the auto stand. Four drivers argued with each other over the next passenger.

'Enga?' one driver pushed back three drivers and asked me. 'Enga hotel?'

'No hotel,' I said and took out my wallet. I opened it and the drivers saw the ten hundred-rupee notes my mother had given me before leaving Delhi. He smacked his lips. I pulled out the slip with the address.

'English illa,' he said.

I looked around. No one proficient in English seemed visible. I read the address.

'Nung-ba-ka-ma-ma?' I said.

'Nungambakkam?' the driver laughed as if it was the easiest word to say in the world.

‘Yeah,’ I said and remembered a landmark Devesh had told me. ‘Near Loyola College. You know Loyola College.’

‘Seri, seri,’ the driver said. My stay with Ananya had told me that ‘Seri’ meant an amiable Tamilian.

I loaded the luggage. ‘Meter?’

He laughed again as if I had made a bawdy joke.

‘What?’ I tapped the meter.

‘Meter illa,’ the driver said loudly, his personality taking on a more aggressive form as he left the airport.

‘How much?’ I asked.

‘Edhuvum,’ he said.

‘I don’t understand. Stop, how much?’

He didn’t stop or answer. I tapped his shoulder. He looked back. I played dumb charade with him, acting out ‘How much money, dude?’

He continued to drive. After ten seconds he raised his right palm and stretched out his five fingers wide.

‘Five what?’

He flashed his fingers again.

‘Fifty?’

He nodded.

‘OK,’ I said. He understood this word.

‘Vokay,’ he said and extended his hand for a handshake. I shook his hand. He laughed and zoomed off into the Chennai sunset.

I saw the city. It had the usual Indian elements like autos, packed public buses, hassled traffic cops and tiny shops that sold groceries, fruits, utensils, clothes or novelty items. However, it did feel different. First, the sign in every shop was in Tamil. The Tamil font resembles those optical illusion puzzles that give you a headache if you stare at them long enough. Tamil women, all of them, wear flowers in their hair. Tamil men don’t believe in pants and wear lungis even in shopping districts. The city is filled with film posters. The heroes’ pictures make

you feel even your uncles can be movie stars. The heroes are fat, balding, have thick moustaches and the heroine next to them is a ravishing beauty. Maybe my mother had a point in saying that Tamil women have a thing for North Indian men.

‘Hey, that’s IIT?’ the auto driver said a word which would have led to trouble if he had spoken it in Delhi.

I looked at the campus wall that lasted for over a kilometre. The driver recited the names of neighbourhoods as we passed them – Adyat, Saidapet, Mambalam and other unpronounceable names so long they wouldn’t fit on an entire row of Scrabble. I felt bad for residents of these areas as they’d waste so much of their time filling the address columns in forms.

We passed a giant, fifty-feet-tall poster as we entered Nungambakkam. The driver stopped the auto. He craned his neck out of the auto and folded his hands.

‘What?’ I gestured.

‘Thalaivar,’ he said, pointing to the poster.

I looked out. The poster was for a movie called *Padayappa*. I saw the actors and recognised only one. ‘Rajnikant?’

The auto driver broke into a huge grin. I had recognised at least one landmark in the city.

He drove into the leafy lanes of Nungambakkam till we reached Loyola College. I asked a few local residents for Chinappa Towers and they pointed us to the right building.

I stepped out of the auto and gave the driver a hundred-rupee note. I wondered if I should give him a ten-rupee tip for his friendliness.

‘Anju,’ the driver said and opened his palm again.

I remained puzzled and realised it when he gestured three times.

‘You want five hundred? Are you mad?’

‘Illa mad,’ the driver said, blocking the auto to prevent me from taking out the luggage.

I looked at the desolate street. It was only nine but felt like two in the morning in the quiet lane. Two autos passed us by. My driver stopped them. One of the autos had two drivers, both sitting in front. The four of them spoke to each other in Tamil, their voices turning louder.

“Five hundred,’ one driver who spoke a bit of English turned to me.

“No five hundred. Fifty,’ I said.

‘Ai,’ another driver screamed. The four of them surrounded me like baddies from a low-budget Kollywood film.

“What? Just give me my luggage and let me go,’ I said.

‘Illa luggage. Payment...make...you,’ the Shakespeare among them spoke to me.

They started moving around me slowly. I wondered why on earth didn’t I choose to work in an air-conditioned office in Delhi when I had the chance.

‘Let’s go to the police station,’ I said, mustering up my Punjabi blood to be defiant.

‘Illa police,’ screamed my driver, who had shaken hands with me just twenty minutes ago.

‘This Chennai...here police is my police...this no North India...illa police, ennoda poola combuda,’ the English-speaking driver said.

Their white teeth glistened in the night. Any impressions of Tamil men being timid (influenced by Ananya’s father) evaporated as I felt a driver tap my back.

‘Fuck,’ I said as I noticed one of the drivers take out something from his pocket. Luckily, it wasn’t a knife but a pack of matches and cigarettes. He lit one in style, influenced by too many Tamil movies. I looked down the street, for anybody, anyone who would get me out of this mess.

One man came out of the next building. I saw him and couldn’t believe it. He had a turban – a Sardar-ji in Chennai was akin to spotting a polar bear in Delhi. He had come out to place a cover on his car. Tingles of relief ran down my spine. Krishna had come to save Draupadi.

‘Uncle!’ I shouted as loudly as I could.

Uncle looked at me. He saw me surrounded by the autos and understood the situation. He came towards us.

The drivers turned, ready to take him on as well.

‘Enna?’ the uncle said.

The drivers gave their version of the story to him. Uncle spoke to them in fluent Tamil. It is fascinating to see a Sardar-ji speak in Tamil. Like Sun TV's merger with Alpha TV.

'Where are you coming from?' he said.

'Airport.'

'Airport cannot be five hundred rupees. Hundred maximum,' he said.

The four drivers started speaking simultaneously with lots of 'illas'. However, they had softened a little due to uncle's Tamil. After five minutes, we settled for a hundred bucks and disgusted glances from the drivers. My driver took out my luggage and dumped it on the street as he sped off.

'Thanks, uncle,' I said. 'You've lived in Chennai long?'

'Too long. Please don't stay as long as me,' Uncle said as he helped me with my luggage to the lift. 'Punjabi?'

I nodded.

'Come home if you need a drink or chicken. Be careful, your building is vegetarian. No alcohol also.'

'Really?'

'Yes, people here are like that. For them, anything fun comes with guilt,' he said as the lift doors shut.

I rang the chummy doorbell. It was ten o'clock. A sleepy guy opened the door. The apartment was completely dark.

'Hi,' I said. Krish from Delhi. I am in consumer finance.'

'Huh?' the guy said. 'Oh, you are that guy. The only North Indian trainee in Citibank Chennai. Come in, you are so late.'

'Flight delay,' I said as I came into the room.

He switched on the drawing-room light. 'I am Ramanujan, from IIMB,' he said. I looked at him. Even just out of the bed, his hair was oily and combed. He looked like someone who would do well at a bank. With my harried look after the scuffle with the auto drivers, I looked like someone who couldn't even open a bank account.

‘That’s Sendil’s room, and that’s Appalingam’s.’

He pointed me to my room.

‘Anything to eat in the house?’ I said.

‘I don’t know,’ he said and opened the fridge. ‘there is some curd rice.’ He took out the bowl. It didn’t look like a dish. It looked like rice had accidentally fallen into the curd.

‘Anything else? Any restaurant open nearby?’

He shook his head as he picked up two envelopes and passed them to me. ‘Here, some letters for you. The servant said a girl had come to see you.’

I looked at the letter. One was the welcome letter from Citibank. The second envelope had Ananya’s handwriting on it. I looked at the curd rice again and tried to imagine it as something yummy but I couldn’t gather the courage to eat it.

I came to my room and lay down on the bed. Ramanujan shut the lights in the rest of the house and went back to sleep.

‘Should we wake you up?’ he had asked before going to his room.

‘What time is office?’

‘Nine, but trainees are expected to be there by eight. We target seven-thirty. We wake up at five.’

I thought about my last two months in Delhi, when waking up at nine was an early start. ‘Is there even daylight at five?’

‘Almost. We’ll wake you up. Good night.’

I closed my door and opened Ananya’s letter.

Hey Chennai boy,

I came to see you, but you hadn’t arrived in the afternoon as you told me. Anyways, I can’t wait any longer as mom thinks I am with friends at the Radha Silks Shop. I have to be back. Anyway there is a bit of drama at home but I don’t want to get into that now.

Don’t worry, we shall meet soon. Your office is in Anna Salai, not far from mine. However, HLL is making me travel a lot all over the state. I have to sell tomato ketchup. Hard, considering it has no tamarind or coconut in it!

I'll leave now. Guess what, I am wearing jasmine flowers in my hair today! It helps to have a traditional look in the interiors. I broke a few petals and have included them in this letter. Hope they remind you of me.

Love and kisses,

Ananya

I opened the folds of the letter. Jasmine petals fell into my lap. They felt soft and smelt wonderful. It was the only thing about this day that made me happy. It reminded me why I was here.

16

It is bad news when you hate your job in the first hour of the first day of office. It isn't like Citibank did anything to piss me off. In fact, they tried their best to make me feel at home. I already had an assigned cubicle and computer. My first stint involved working in a group that served 'priority banking' clients, a politically correct term to address 'stinking rich' customers. There is little a customer needed to do to become priority except wave bundles of cash at us. Priority customers received special service, which included sofas for waiting areas instead of chairs, free tea while the bank representative discussed new ways to nibble...oops sorry, invest clients' money. And the biggest touted perk was you would get direct access to your Customer Service Managers. These were supposed to be financial wizards from the top MBA schools who would take your financial strategy to a whole new level. Yes, that would be me. Of course, we never mentioned that your customer service manager could hate his job, do it only for the money and would have come to the city only because his girlfriend was here.

I had to supervise eight bank representatives. The bank representatives were younger, typically graduates or MBAs from non-blue-blooded institutions. And I, being from an IIM and therefore injected with a sense of entitlement for life, would obviously be above them. I didn't speak Tamil or know anything about banking, but I had to pretend I knew what I was doing. At least to my boss Balakrishnan or Bala.

'Welcome to the family,' he said as we shook hands.

I wondered if he was related to Ananya. 'Family?'

'The Citibank family. And of course, the Priority Banking family. You are so lucky. New MBAs would die to get a chance to start straight in this group.'

I smiled.

'Are you excited, young man?' Bala asked in a high-pitched voice.

'Super-excited,' I said, wondering if they'd let me leave early as it was my first day.

He took me to the priority banking area. Eight reps, four guys and four girls read research reports and tips from various departments on what they could see

today. I met everyone though I forgot their similar sounding South Indian names the minute ii heard them.

‘Customers start coming in at ten, two hours from now,’ Bala said. ‘And that is when the battle begins. We believe trainees learn best by facing action. Ready for war?’

I looked at him. I could tell he was a Citibank lifer. At forty, he had probably spent twenty years already in the bank.

‘Ready? Any questions, champ?’ Bala asked again.

‘Yeah, what exactly am I supposed to do?’

Bala threw me the first of his many disappointed looks at me. He asked a rep for the daily research reports. ‘Two things you need to do, actually three,’ Bala said as he took me to my desk. ‘One, read these reports everyday and see if you can recommend any investments to the clients. Like look at this.’ He pulled out a report from the equities group. It recommended shares of Internet companies as their values had dropped by half.

‘But isn’t the dot com bubble bursting?’ I asked. ‘These companies would never make money.’

Bala looked at me like I had spoken to him in pure Punjabi.

‘See, our research has given a buy here. This is Citibank’s official research,’ Bala spoke like he was quoting from the Bible. Official research was probably written by hung-over MBA three years out of business school.

‘Fine, what else?’

‘The second important job is to develop a relationship. Tamilians love educated people. You, being from IIT and IIM, must develop a relationship with them.’

I nodded. I was the endangered species in the priority-banking zoo that customers could come throw bananas at.

‘Now, it is going to be hard for you as you are...’ Bala paused as if he came to a swear word in the conversation.

‘Punjabi?’

‘Yes, but can you befriend Tamilians?’

'I am trying to. I have to,' I said, wondering where I could call Ananya apart from her home number. If only these damn cell-phone prices would drop fast.

'Good. And the last thing is,' Bala moved forward to whisper, 'these reps are quite lazy. Keep an eye on them. Anyone not doing their job, tell me.' He winked at me and stood up to leave. 'And come to office early.'

'I came at seven-thirty. Isn't the official time nine?'

'Yes, but when I was your level, I came at seven. If you want to be like me, wake up, soldier,' Bala said and laughed at his own joke. The Tamil sense of humour, if there is any, is really an acquired taste.

I didn't want to be like him. I didn't even want to be here. I took a deep breath after he left and meditated on my salary package. *You are doing it for the money*, I told myself. *Four lakh a year, that is thirty-three thousand a month*, I chanted the mantra in my head. My father had worked in the army for thirty years and still never earned half as much. I had to push bubble stocks and the cash would be mine. Life isn't so bad, I said to myself.

'Sir, can I go to the toilet?' one female rep came to me.

'What?'

She looked at me, waiting for permission.

'What's your name?'

'Sri.'

'Where are you from?'

'Coimbatore,' she said, adjusting her oversized spectacles with cockroach-coloured borders. Fashion is not a Chennai hallmark.

'You went to college?'

'Yes sir. Coimbatore University, distinction, sir.'

'Good. Then why are you asking me for permission?'

'Just like that, sir.' She said.

'No one needs to ask me permission for going to the toilet,' I said.

'Thank you, sir.'

I read reports for the next two hours. Each one had financial models done by overenthusiastic MBAs who were more keen to solve equations than to question what they were doing. One table compared value of Internet companies with the number of visitors to the site. The recommended company had the lowest value to eyeball ratio, a trendy term invented by the analyst. Hence, BUY! screamed the report. Of course, the analyst never questioned that none of the site visitors ever paid any money to the Internet company. 'It is trading cheap on every multiple conceivable!' the report said, complete with the exclamation mark.

'Sir, my customer is here. Can I bring them to you?' Sri requested well after her return from the toilet.

'Sure,' I said.

'Sir, this is Ms Sreenivas,' Sri said. A fifty-year-old lady with gold bangles thicker than handcuffs came to my cubicle. We moved to the sofa area, to give a more personal, living room feel as we robbed the customer.

'You are from IIT?' she peered at me.

'Yes,' I said even as I readied my pitch about which loss-making company to buy.

'Even my grandson is preparing for it,' she said. She had dark hair, with oil that made it shine more.

'You don't look old enough to have a grandson preparing for IIT,' I said.

Ms Sreenivas smiled. Sri smiled back at her. Yes, we had laid the mousetrap and the cheese. Walk in, baby.

'Oh no, I am an old lady. He is only in class six though.'

'How much is madam's balance?' I asked.

'One crore and twenty lakh, sir,' Sri supplied.

I imagined the number in my head; I'd need to work in this job for thirty years to get there. It almost felt right to part her from her money. 'Madam, have you invested in any stocks? Internet stocks are cheap these days,' I said.

Ms Sreenivas gave me a worried look. 'Stocks? Never. And my son works in an Internet company abroad. He said they might close down.'

'That's USA, madam. This is India, we have one billion population, or two billion eyeballs. Imagine the potential of the Internet. And we have a mutual fund, so you don't have to invest in any one company.'

We cajoled Ms Sreenivas for five minutes. I threw in a lot of MBA terms like strategic advantage, bottom-line vs. top line, top down vs. bottom up and it made me sound very intelligent. Ms Sreenivas and Sri nodded at whatever I said. Ultimately, Ms Sreenivas agreed to nibble at toxic waste.

'Let's start with ten lakh,' I said to close the case.

'Five. Please, five,' Ms Sreenivas pleaded with us on how to use her own money.

I settled at five and Sri was ecstatic, I had become their favourite customer service manager.

Bala took me out for lunch at Sangeetha's, a dosa restaurant.

'What dosas do you have?' I asked the waiter.

'We have eighty-five kinds,' the waiter pointed to the board. Every stuffing imaginable to man was available in dosa form.

'Try the spinach dosa. And the sweet banana dosa,' Bala said as he smiled at me like the father I never had. 'So, how does it feel, to get your first investment? Heart pumping?'

My heart didn't pump. It only ached. I'd been in Chennai for fifteen hours and had not spoken to Ananya yet. I wanted to buy a cell-phone as soon as possible. Wait, I'd need two.

'I see myself in you. You are like me,' Bala said as he dunked his first piece of dosa in sambhar. I had no clue how he reached that conclusion.

I had Ananya's home landline number. But, she didn't reach home until seven. She had a sales field job so no fixed office number as well. I remembered how we'd finish lunch in campus and snuggle up for our afternoon nap. It is official, life after college sucks.

'Isn't this fun?' Bala said. 'I get a rush every time I come to the bank. And it is twenty years. Wow, I still remember the day my boss first took me out for lunch. Hey, what are you thinking? Stop work thoughts now. It is lunch-time.

'Of course,' I said and collected myself. 'How far is HLL office from here?'

‘Why? You have a potential client?’ Bala asked as if the only reason people existed was to become priority banking customers.

‘Possibly,’ I said. One good thing about banking is that you don’t feel bad about lying at all.

‘It is in Nungambakkam. Apex Plaza,’ he said.

The waiter reloaded our sambhar and delivered the banana dosa. The latter tasted like a pancake, and I have to say, wasn’t bad at all. ‘Oh, that’s where I am staying, right?’

‘Yes, the Citi chummery. My first home too,’ he leaned forward and patted my back.

I suppose I had a good boss. I should have felt happy but didn’t. I wondered if I should call HLL first or straight land up there.

I came back to my desk in the afternoon. I met some customers, but most of them didn’t have time to stay long. Ms Sreenivas had given me a lucky break, but it wasn’t that easy to woo conservative Tamilians, after all.

‘Fixed deposit. I like fixed deposit,’ one customer told me when I asked him for his investment preferences.

At three in the afternoon, I had a call.

‘It is for you, sir,’ Sri said as she transferred the line to my extension.

‘Hi, I’d like to open a priority account, with my hot-shot sexy banker.’

‘Ananya?’ I said, my voice bursting with happiness, ‘Where are you? When are we meeting? Should I come to HLL? I am sorry my flight...’

‘Easy, easy. I am in Kancheepuram.’

‘Where’s that?’

‘Three hours from Chennai. I’ll head back soon. Why don’t you come home for dinner?’

‘Home? Your home? With your mom and dad?’

‘Yes, why not? You have to know them anyway. Mom’s a little low these days, but that is OK.’

‘Why is she low? Because of us?’

‘No, she finds other reasons to be miserable. Luckily, this time it has nothing to do with me.’

‘Ananya, let’s go out, OK?’

‘I can’t today. My aunt is visiting from Canada. Come at eight.’ She gave me her address. I noted it down after making her spell it thrice. ‘See you in five hours,’ she said and hung up.

I stared at the watch, hoping it would move faster. The reps left at six, and as Citi’s great culture goes, MBAs never left until eight.

I killed time reading reports on the Indian economy. Smart people had written them, and they made GDP forecasts for the next ten years with confidence that his the basic fact – *how can you really tell, dude?*

At seven-thirty I stood up to leave. Bala came towards me. “Leaving?” he asked, puzzled as if I had planned to take a half day.

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘Not much to do.’

‘One tip, never leave before your boss,’ he said and winked at me. He laughed, and I didn’t find it funny at all. I want to see what a Tamil joke book looks like.

‘What time do you leave?’ I said, tired.

‘Soon, actually let me call it a day. Kusum will be waiting. You want to come home for dinner?’

‘No, thanks,’ I said.

He gave me the second disappointed look.

‘I have to go somewhere, distant relatives,’ I said.

‘Oh,’ he said, his voice still a little sad.

I am sorry dude, I am not handing you the remote of my life because you are my boss, I thought.

17

‘Swaminathan’, the name plate of Ananya’s small standalone house proclaimed in arched letters. I pressed the doorbell even as a buzzing grinder drowned the ring.

‘Yes?’ Ananya’s father opened the door with a puzzled expression. I bet he recognised me but feigned ignorance to rattle me. He wore a half-sleeve white vest with a front pocket and a checked blue and white lungi.

‘Krish, sir, Ananya’s friend,’ I said. For no particular reason, fear makes me address people as sir. I had brought a gift pack of biscuits, as my Punjabi sensibilities had taught me to never go to someone’s house without at least as many calories as you would consume there.

‘Oh, come in,’ he said after I reintroduced myself.

I stepped inside and handed him the gift pack.

‘Shoes!’ he said in a stern voice when I had expected ‘thanks’.

‘What?’ I said.

He pointed at the shoe rack outside the house.

I removed my shoes and checked my socks for smells and holes. I decided to take them off too, I went inside.

‘Don’t step on the rangoli,’ he warned.

I looked down. My right foot rested on a rice flour flower pattern. ‘Sorry, I am really sorry, sir,’ I said and bent down to repair the pattern.

‘It’s OK. It can’t be fixed now,’ he said and ushered me into the living room. The long rectangular room looked like what would be left if a Punjabi drawing was robbed. The sofas were simple, with cushions thinner than Indian Railways sleepers had and from the opposite of the decadent red velvet sofas Pammi aunty. The walls had a pale green distemper finish. There were pictures of various South Indian gods all around the room. The dining area had floor seating. At one corner, there was a daybed with a tambura (which looks like a sitar) kept on it. An old man sat there. I wondered if Ananya’s parents were cool enough to arrange live music for dinner.

‘Sit,’ Ananya’s father said, pointing at the sofa.

We sat opposite each other as I faced Ananya's dad for the first time in my life. I strained my brain hard for a suitable topic. 'Nice place,' I said.

'What is nice? No water in this area,' uncle said as he picked up a newspaper.

I hung my head, as if to apologise for the water problem in Mylapore.

Uncle opened the newspaper, which blocked his face from mine. I didn't know if it was intentional. I kept quiet and turned to the man with the tambura. I smiled, but he didn't react. The house had an eerie silence. A Punjabi house is never this silent even when people sleep at night.

I bent forward to see if uncle was reading the paper or avoiding me. He had opened the editorial page of *The Hindu*. He read an opinion piece about AIADMK asking the government to do an enquiry on the defense minister who had sacked the naval chief. It was heavy-duty stuff. No one in my family, correction, no one in my extended clan ever read editorial pages of newspapers, let alone articles about AIADMK.

Uncle caught me peeking over him and grunted, 'What?'

'Nothing,' I said. I didn't know why I felt so guilty.

Uncle continued to read for five minutes. I had an opportunity to speak again when he turned the page. 'No one is at home, sir?'

'Where will they go?'

'I can't see anyone.'

'Cooking. Can't you hear the grinder?' he said.

I didn't know if Ananya's father was naturally like this or extra grumpy today. *Maybe he is pissed about me being here*, I thought.

'You want water?' he said.

'No sir,' I said.

'Why? Why you don't want water?'

I didn't have an answer except that I felt scared and weird in this house. 'OK, give me water,' I said.

'Radha,' uncle screamed. 'Tanni!'

'Is that Ananya's grandfather,' I said, pointing to the old man.

'No,' he said.

I realised Ananya's father answered exactly what was asked. 'Who is he?' I asked slowly.

'It's Radha's Carnatic music teacher who came to see her. But she is busy in the kitchen making dinner for you. Now what to do?'

I nodded.

Ananya's mother came in the living room. She held a tray with a glass of water and a plate of savouries. The spiral-shaped, brown-coloured snacks resembled fossilised snakes.

'Hello, aunty,' I stood up.

'Hello, Krish,' she said.

'I am sorry I came at the wrong time,' I said, looking at the teacher.

'It's OK. Ananya invited you. And she has a habit of not consulting me,' Ananya's mother said.

'Aunty, we can all go out,' I said.

'It's OK. Food is almost ready,' she said and turned to her husband. 'Give me half an hour with Guruji.' She went up to Guruji and touched his feet. The Guruji blessed her. Ananya's mother picked up the tambura and they left the room.

'So, Citibank placed you in Chennai?' uncle said, initiating conversation with me for the first time.

'Yes, sir' I said. Ananya had told him the bank transferred me.

'Why do they send North Indians here?'

'I don't know, sir.'

'Useless buggers,' he mumbled and buried himself in his newspaper again.

I cleared my throat and finally gathered the courage to ask. 'Where's Ananya?'

Uncle looked up in shock as if I had asked him where he kept his porn collection. 'She had gone for a bath. She will come after evening prayers.'

I nodded. Ananya never did any evening prayers in Ahmedabad. I heard noises from the other room. They sounded like long wails, as if someone was being slowly strangled. I looked puzzled and uncle looked at me.

‘Carnatic music,’ uncle said. ‘You know?’

I shook my head.

‘Then what do you know?’ he asked and sank into *The Hindu* waiting for me to respond.

I had an urge to run out of the house. *What the fuck am I doing here in this psycho home?* I heard footsteps outside.

‘Sorry,’ Ananya said, coming in.

I turned to look at her. I was seeing her after two months. She wore a cream-coloured cotton sari with a thin gold border. She seemed prettier than I last saw her. I wanted to grab her and plant the biggest kiss on her lips ever. Of course, things had to be different with Mr Hindu-addict Grumpyswami in front of me.

‘Hi Ananya, good to see you,’ I greeted her like a colleague at work. I kept my hands close to my body.

‘What? Give me a hug,’ she said and uncle finally lost interest in *The Hindu*.

‘Sit here, Ananya,’ he said and carefully folded the newspaper like he would read it again every day for the rest of his life.

‘Hi dad,’ Ananya said and kissed her father on the cheek. I felt jealous. ‘Oh, mom is singing,’ she said, upon hearing her mother shriek again.

‘Yes, finally,’ Ananya’s father said. ‘Can you tell the raga?’

Ananya closed her eyes to listen. She looked beautiful but I had to look away as uncle eyed every move of mine.

‘It’s malhar, definitely malhar,’ she said.

Uncle nodded his head in appreciation.

‘How many ragas are there?’ I asked, trying to fit in.

‘A thousand, yeah dad?’ Ananya said.

‘At least. You don’t listen to Carnatic music?’ uncle said to me.

‘Not much, but it is kind of nice,’ I said. Of course, saying I have no fucking clue what you are talking about didn’t seem quite right.

‘Mom won two championships at the Tamil Sangam in Kolkata when dad was posted there,’ Ananya said, her voice proud.

‘But she has stopped singing since we came to Chennai,’ uncle said and threw up his hands.

‘Why?’ I said.

‘Various reasons,’ Ananya said and gestured at me to change the topic.

‘Your aunt is here?’ I asked.

‘Yes, Shobha athai is in the kitchen. She is dad’s elder sister.’

I prayed Shobha aunty didn’t have a personality like her brother’s. Silence fell in the room. I picked up a snack to eat it. Every crunch would be clearly in the room. I had to keep the conversation going. I had read a book on making friends a while ago. It said take an interest in people’s work and keep bringing their name into the conversation.

‘So, you have worked all over India, Mr Swaminathan?’ I said.

‘A few places, until I became stuck here,’ he said.

‘Stuck? I thought you like Chennai, your hometown,’ I said.

Uncle gave me a dirty look. I wondered if I had said something inappropriate.

‘I’ll get Shobha. Let’s eat dinner soon,’ uncle said and left the room. I wanted to ask Ananya about her father, but I wanted to grab her first.

‘Don’t,’ Ananya said as she sensed my intentions.

‘What?’

‘Don’t move. Keep a three-feet distance,’ she said.

‘Are you mad? There is no one here.’

‘Not here? My mother is singing in the next room for God’s sake.’

‘That’s singing?’

‘Shut up,’ she giggled. ‘And I’d suggest you learn a bit of Carnatic music. No, stop, don’t get off the sofa.’ She gave me a flying kiss and I subsided back into the sofa.

‘Dad is having a bad month at the bank,’ Ananya whispered. ‘He got passed over for promotion. He deserved to head Bank of Baroda for his district but dirty politics happened. And he hates politics.’

I didn’t mention the interest with which he read the AIADMK article. ‘Where is your brother?’

‘He slept already. He wakes up early to study.’

We heard footsteps.

‘Be careful with Shobha aunty. Speak minimum,’ she said.

‘Why?’ I said as Ananya’s mother came to the living room again. She and her guru walked towards the main door. Aunty had a disappointed expression.

‘Illa practice?’ the guru mumbled as Ananya’s mother spoke to him in Tamil.

The guru shook his head and left.

‘What?’ Ananya asked her.

‘Nothing. Where is your appa and athai? Let’s eat,’ Ananya’s mother said in a serious tone.

Ananya’s father and aunt came to the living room. They carried more dishes than their arms were designed for. I stood up to help. ‘Hello aunty, can I take something!’

‘Wash your hands,’ uncle told me and pointed me to the kitchen.

We sat on the floor for dinner. Ananya’s father passed me a banana leaf. I wondered if I had to eat it or wipe my hands with it.

‘Place it down, it is the plate,’ Ananya whispered.

‘Radha,’ Shobha aunty said in a stern voice as she pointed to her banana leaf. It had specks of dirt on one side.

‘Oh, sorry, sorry,’ Radha aunty said and replaced it. It wasn’t different from Shipra masi finding faults with my mother. Psycho relatives are constant across cultures.

I followed Ananya as she loaded her plate with rice, sambhar, funny-looking vegetables and two kinds of brown powders.

‘What’s this?’ I asked.

‘Gunpowder, try it,’ she said.

I tasted it. It felt like sawdust mixed with chillies.

‘Yummy, no?’

I nodded at Ananya. Everyone first kept neat little lumps of dishes on their banana leaf. Soon they mixed it into a slurry heap.

‘Mix more,’ Ananya said as I tried to copy my in-laws-to-be.

‘You are Ananya’s classmate?’ Shobha aunty spoke for the first time.

‘Yes, at IIM,’ I said.

‘IIT student?’

I nodded. Ananya had told me that my IIT tag was the only silver lining in my otherwise outcast status in their family.

‘Sushila’s cousin is also from IIT. Radha, I told you, no? Harish lives in San Francisco.’

‘Which batch?’ I asked.

‘IIT Madras, not your college,’ Shobha aunty said, pissed off at being interrupted.

I kept quiet and looked at the various vegetables, trying to recognize them. I said hello to beans and cabbage.

‘Harish’s parents want to get him married. You have Ananya’s nakshtram?’ Shobha aunty said.

‘No, not yet,’ Ananya’s mother said.

‘What, swami? Your wife is not interested in finding a good son-in-law?’

I couldn’t believe they were discussing all this in my presence. ‘Can you pass the rice?’ I said, hoping to steer the conversation elsewhere.

'Radha, you must listen to Shobha. She knows best,' Ananya's father said. Indian men slam their wives for their sisters with zero hesitation.

Ananya's mother nodded as Shobha aunty started to discourse in Tamil. Ananya's dad and mother also responded in Tamil. It was irritating to watch a regional language movie in front of me.

After five minutes I spoke again. 'Excuse me?'

'What?' Ananya's father said.

'Can you speak in English? I can't follow the conversation,' I said.

Ananya looked at me, shocked. Back off, her eyes said.

'Then learn Tamil,' Ananya's father said.

'Yes sir,' I said meekly.

'Anyway, this doesn't concern you,' he added.

I nodded. I heard various technology companies' the boys' names. I felt like upturning my banana leaf on Shobha aunty's face.

I left soon after dinner. Ananya came outside to help me get an auto. Ananya held my arm as we came on the desolate street.

'I am not talking to you,' I said and extracted my hand from her.

'What?' she said.

We passed by a bungalow with coconut trees in the garden.

'They are planning your marriage. What the hell is nakshtram?' I said.

'It's the astrological chart. They are fantasizing. I am not getting married to anyone else but you.'

She held up my hand and kissed it. I extracted it again. I hailed an auto. Ananya would have to negotiate with him in Tamil else I'd have to pay double. 'How am I going to win them over? It is impossible to get through. Sitting with your father is like being called to the principal's office.'

Ananya laughed.

'It's not funny.'

'It is a little. What about my mom?'

'I used to be scared of her pictures in campus. Forget her in real life! Her looks alone kill me.'

'Her pictures scared you?'

'Yes, that is why I never wanted to make love in your room. I'd notice your mother's pictures and chills ran down my spine. I'd imagine her saying, ***What are you doing with my daughter?***

Ananya laughed again. 'If we weren't in Mylapore, I'd have kissed you. You are so cute,' she said.

'Cut it out, Ananya, what is our plan? Will you speak to your mother?'

'Mom's stressed out. Her Carnatic teacher refused to teach her.'

'Why?'

'I'll tell you later.'

'Can we meet tomorrow? Outside, please,' I said.

'Meet me at Marina beach at six,' she said.

'I can't do six. My extra-caring boss Bala leaves at eight.'

'I didn't say evening.'

'Six in the morning?' I gulped.

Ananya had already turned to the auto driver.

'Nungambakkam, twenty rupees, extra illai, OK?' she told him.

18

The beautiful sunrise at Marina Beach compensated for the 5 a.m. wake up call. Hundreds of people took a morning walk along the seashore which ran down miles.

‘Do you know this is the biggest city beach in Asia?’ Ananya asked as she met me at the police headquarters building.

‘You’ve told me,’ I said.

‘Why are you in formals?’

‘I go straight to work. Trainees are expected to be there at seven-thirty,’ I said, removing my shoes and folding my pants up to walk along the beach.

‘To do what?’

‘To suck up to the boss, who if you do a good job will promote you to the next level of sucking up. Welcome to corporate life,’ I said.

‘I am not facing it yet. I have to sell a thousand bottles of ketchup every week. I am so behind my targets.’

‘You’d better ketch-up fast,’ I said.

‘Funny,’ she said and punched me. Ananya saw a man with a bicycle. He carried a basket full of idlis. ‘Breakfast?’ she offered.

‘Don’t they have toast?’

‘Don’t grumble,’ she said. We took four idlis and sat on a bench facing the water. She spoke about her mother. ‘Guruji didn’t accept mom. He felt she isn’t dedicated enough.’

‘But isn’t she really good?’ I asked, not that I could tell from the shrill cries I heard last night.

‘She isn’t good enough by Chennai standards. Dad used to be posted in towns outside Tamil Nadu. Mom became a star in the Tamilian community there. Here, she is just OK. Chennai’s Carnatic music scene is at a different level.’

I nodded as if I understood.

'My parents came to Chennai with great enthusiasm. But now dad lost his promotion. Pesky relatives visit us all the time. Amidst all this, their daughter wants to impose a non-Brahmin, non-Tamil, Punjabi boy on them. Of course, they will freak out. We have to be patient. I love them, too, Krish,' she said and paused for breath.

A gentle breeze blew on our faces. She laid her head on my left shoulder. I stroked her hair. The sun emerged out of the Bay of Bengal, a soft red at first, turning into a warmer orange. I put my arm around Ananya. In my tie and formal pants, I looked like a salesman with no place to take his girlfriend to make out.

'there is only one way you can get regular access to my home,' Ananya said after staring at the horizon for a minute.

'What?'

'IIT tuitions for my brother. They'd accept anything for that,' she said.

I let go of her and sat up straight. 'Are you crazy? I prepared for the IIT exam eight years ago. I can't teach him.'

'I'm sure you can revise some notes and help him. My parents have to get comfortable with you. Only then can I ask them to seriously consider you.'

I dipped my idli into coconut chutney and ate it. I missed my mother's hot paranthas at breakfast.

'Do you love me?' She wiped a bit of chutney from my lips.

I kissed her. I was kissing her after two months. I didn't release her for a minute. I'd revise IIT chemistry for this chemistry any day.

'Ai!' a hoarse voice screamed behind us.

I turned around. A pot-bellied Tamilian cop, looking more villain than police, walked fast towards us. 'What is this?' he said and slammed his stick on the bench. Both of us sprang up. Ananya hid behind me.

'Oh fuck,' she said. 'Get rid of him.'

The cop screamed at me in Tamil. Helpless, I asked Ananya to translate.

'He wants to take us to the police station. He is saying we have some nerve doing all this outside police headquarters.'

'Why do they have police headquarters opposite a beach?' I asked.

‘Shut up and pay him off,’ she whispered.

I took out my wallet and took out twenty bucks.

‘Illa Illa...’ the cop continued to shout and grabbed my arms.

I took out a fifty. He looked at me and Ananya. ‘Warning,’ the cop said as he took the note.

Ananya laughed after the cop left us.

‘It’s not funny,’ I said as I wore my shoes again and straightened my pants. ‘Can we meet at my chummery, please?’

‘In a while. I travel out of Chennai everyday and come back late,’ she said.

‘Weekend?’

‘I’ll try,’ she said. ‘You will feed me chicken? I’m dying to have non-veg. and get beer, too.’

‘OK,’ I promised. My building had vegetarian-only rules, but surely they wouldn’t notice if I brought something readymade from outside.

We sat in our respective autos. She spoke to me from her side window. ‘And I’ll speak to my parents about the tuitions. Twice a week at five?’

‘Five in the morning?’ Why is everyone so eager to wake up in this town!

‘That’s when everyone goes for tuitions,’ she said and sped off.

I had to wait for two miserable weeks in Chennai until Ananya finally decided to visit my chummery for lunch one Saturday. One weekend Ananya’s mother fell ill and Ananya had to cook for the family, courtesy a guilt trip from her mother. The food did not come out right, as Ananya’s culinary experience is limited to making Maggi in my room and making papads with a clothes iron (yes, it works). This led to another guilt trip from Shobha aunty to Ananya’s mother who blamed her for not bringing up her daughter right. The guilt trip percolated down to Ananya, who had to take Shobha aunty jewellery and sari shopping the next weekend.

Meanwhile, I had visited Brilliant Tutorials and bought IIT exam guides. I couldn’t believe how tough the course materials were. The only reason I managed

to study them in the past was because that distracted me from my parents' fights. I revised chemistry to prepare for my first class.

I also went to my Sardar-ji neighbor to find out the best way to procure chicken and beers.

"Who is coming? Punjabi friends?" he asked.

'Work people,' I said, to stop him from inviting himself.

'Be careful when you take it up in the lift,' he said.

As he told me, I went to the Delhi Dhabha in Nungambakkam, less than a kilometre from my house. I triple-packed the tandoori chicken so no smell came out. I went to the government-approved liquor shop, where they had trouble establishing my age. 'Are you over twenty-five?'

'No, but will be soon,' I said.

'Then we can't give you,' the shopkeeper said.

'Even if I pay ten bucks extra a bottle?'

It is amazing how money relaxes rules around the country. The shopkeeper packed the three bottles in brown paper, and I further placed them in a plastic bag, so one couldn't make out the shape.

'What's in it?' the liftman asked me as the bottles touched the ground noisily when I placed the packet on the floor.

'Lemon squash,' I said.

'You should have coconut water instead,' the liftman said.

I nodded and reached my apartment. Ramanujan saw me place the bottles in the fridge. "what's that?" He wore a lungi and nothing on top apart from a white thread around his shoulders.

'Beer,' I said.

'Dude, you can't get alcohol in this building,' he said.

'My girlfriend is visiting me. She likes it,' I said.

'You have a girlfriend?' Ramanujan repeated like I had ten wives. None of my flatmates had a girlfriend. They were all qualified, well-paid Tamil Citibankers who planned to be auctioned off soon by their parents.

'Yes, from college,' I said.

My other roommates came to the living room. None of them wore shirts. I shut the fridge to avoid further conversation on the beverages.

'She is visiting Chennai? Sendil said.

'Will she stay here? She can't stay here,' Appalingam said.

'She lives in Chennai,' I said.

The boys looked at each other as to who would ask the bell-the-cat question.

'Tamilian?' Ramanujan asked.

'Yes,' I said, 'Tamil Brahmin.' I added the last two words to let them absorb the shock at once.

'Wow!' all of them said in unison.

'She drinks beer?' Ramanujan said.

'Yes,' I said and upturned the chicken into a bowl.

'And chicken? What kind of Brahmin is this?' Sendil said. 'And dude, don't get non-veg in this house.'

'It's my house, too,' I said.

'But rules are rules,' he said.

People in this city loved rules, or rather loved to follow rules. Except if you are a cop or a liquor shop attendant or an auto driver.

'Let it be, Sendil,' Ramanujan said.

'Thanks,' I said and placed the chicken in the fridge. 'And guys, please wear shirts when she is here.'

Ananya came to my place at two o'clock. I greeted her politely in the living room. My flatmates exchanged shy glances with each other as she greeted them. Sendil spoke to her in Tamil. Tamilians love to irritate non-Tamil speakers by speaking only in Tamil in front of them. This is the only silent rebellion in their otherwise repressed, docile personality. When she finally entered my bedroom, I grabbed her from behind.

'Can we eat first? I haven't had chicken for a month.'

'I haven't had sex for four months,' I said, but she went out and opened the fridge.

'You have beer too. Superb!' she praised and she pulled out a bottle. She offered it to my flatmates; they declined. We moved the food and beer to my bedroom. I didn't want my friends outside to witness sin as we finished a full chicken and two beers.

'And now for dessert,' I said and came close to her.

'If I burp, don't stop loving me,' she said as her lips came close to mine.

I burped. She slapped me. We kissed and kissed and kissed some more. Our lovemaking was more intense, not only because we did it after a long time, but also because we were doing it in this stuck-up city for the first time.

'Mr Citibanker, there is no train to catch. Slower, gentler next-time,' Ananya said as we lay back. I sighed as I entered a semi-trance state. Ramanujan played Tamil music outside the room.

'What, say something? Men just want sex,' she said and kicked my leg.

'Yeah, that's why I've agreed to teach your brother at five in the morning. You want to see my chemistry notes?' I sat up, wore my clothes and pulled out tutorials from the drawer. 'I read these for four hours last night,' I said.

'So sweet,' she said and came forward to kiss my cheek. 'Don't worry. My parents will soon see how wonderful you are. And then they will love you like I do.'

'They'll sleep with me?' I lay down next to her.

She elbowed me in my stomach.

'That hurt,' I said.

'Good.' She looked into my eyes. Her gaze turned soft. 'I know the tuitions are hard. My parents are weird people. You'll not give up, right?'

'I won't give up.' I stroked her hair.

'This is so amazing, this intimacy. Isn't it even better than the sex?'

'I'm not so sure,' I said and reached a hand to increase the fan speed.

'We never talk. At home, my mom and dad, they hardly talk. We'll talk about the news, the food, the weather. But we never talk about our feelings. I only do that with you,' she said.

I kept quiet. She sat up to wear her clothes. She picked up the pillows from the floor and placed them back on the bed. I pulled her arm and made her sit down with me again.

'How come you don't ask me to run away with you?' she asked.

'You want me to? What if I did ask you to elope?'

'I wouldn't know what to do. I don't want to hurt them. I already have by choosing a Punjabi mate, but I think we can win them over, I want them to smile on our wedding day. That's how I imagined my marriage since I was a child. What about you?'

I thought for a minute. 'I don't want to elope,' I said.

'Why?'

'It's too easy. And that doesn't serve the greater purpose.'

Ananya stepped off the bed and brought back the leftovers. She took the crumbs of chicken and ate them as we talked. 'Greater purpose?'

'Yes, these stupid biases and discrimination are the reason our country is so screwed up. It's Tamil first, Indian later. Punjabi first, Indian later. It has to end.'

Ananya looked at me. 'Go on,' she coaxed mischievously.

I continued, 'National anthem, national currency, national teams – we won't marry our children outside our state. How can this intolerance be good for our country?'

Ananya smiled. 'Is it the chicken, is it the beer or is it the sex? What has charged you up so much? Flatter me and say it is the sex. C'mon say it,' she said.

'I'm serious Ananya. This bullshit must end.'

'And how are we making it end?'

'Imagine our kids.'

'I have, several times. I want them to have my face. Only your eyes,' she said.

‘Not that, think about this – they won’t be Tamil or Punjabi. They will be Indian. They will be above all this nonsense. If all young people marry outside their community, it is good for the country. That is the greater purpose.’

‘Oh, so the reason you sleep with me is for the sake of your country,’ she said.

‘Well, in some ways, yes.’ I smiled sheepishly.

She took a pillow and launched an attack on my head. And then, for the sake of my country, we made love again.

‘Open up, Krish,’ Ramanujan’s worried voice and loud bangs on the door woke me from my nap.

19

Ananya was sleeping next to me and my head hurt from the beer. Ramanujan continued to slam the door.

‘What?’ I opened the door.

‘I’ve been knocking for five minutes,’ Ramanujan said. ‘Come out, the landlord is here.’

‘Landlord?’

‘Yes, be nice to him. It’s the last chummary in Nungambakkam. I don’t want to be kicked out.’

‘What happened?’ I asked.

‘Come out first.’

I shut the door and wore the rest of my clothes.

‘Ananya,’ I said.

‘Baby, I’m sleepy,’ she said, trying to pull me back into bed.

‘My landlord is here,’ I said. She didn’t respond even though I shook her maniacally.

‘Your appa is outside,’ I said.

She sprang up on the bed. ‘What?’

‘Come out. My landlord is here,’ I said.

I went to the living room. My flatmates sat on the dining table. Mr Punnu, our sixty-year old landlord, gravely occupied the largest chair. His face had a permanently tragic expression.

I sat next to him. No one spoke.

‘Hi guys,’ Ananya came out after five minutes. ‘You want tea? I’ll make some.’ She started to walk towards the kitchen.

‘Ananya, I will see you later,’ I said.

Ananya looked at me, shocked. She tuned into the mood on the dining table. 'I'll leave now.' She picked up her bag.

Mr Punnu stood up after Ananya left the house. He sniffed hard. He peeped into my room. 'Chicken?' he frowned.

I didn't respond. Beer bottles lay on the bedside table.

'Ladies?' he said.

'She works in HLL,' I said, having no clue why I had to mention her corporate status.

'Chicken, beer, lady friends – what is going on here?' he said.

Fun, I wanted to say but didn't. Those three things are what men live for anyway.

Everyone kept quiet. I wondered who had sneaked. My flatmates were no friend material, but somehow I didn't expect them to be suck schmucks. Maybe the watchman did it.

'I didn't expect this from you boys,' Punnu said in a heavy Tamil accent.

'It's my fault. I brought the chicken and beer for my girlfriend,' I said.

'Girlfriend?' Punnu said as if I spoke in pure Sanskrit.

'She is my batch-mate. A nice girl,' I said.

Mr Punnu didn't seem impressed.

'She's Tamil Brahmin,' I said.

'And you?'

'Punjabi,' I said and my head hung low a little by default.

'How is she a nice girl if she is roaming around with you?' Mr Punnu asked.

He had a valid point. I decided to change the topic. 'Mr Punnu, this is not a boarding school. We are all professionals and what we do in our own home...'

Mr Punnu banged his fist on the table. 'This is my home,' he pointed out.

'Yes, but you have leased it to us. Technically, we have a right to not let you into the property.'

Mr Punnu looked aghast. Ramanujan had to save the situation. ‘He doesn’t know, Mr Punnu. He is new here. We should have told him it is a veg building and no alcohol.’

‘Not even a drop,’ Mr Punnu said. “I have not touched it all my life.’

Mr Punnu looked like he had touched neither wine nor a woman all his life, but badly needed to.

‘Apologise,’ Ramanujan told me.

I glanced around. Tamils gathered around me like the LTTE. I had no choice. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

‘No ladies from now on.’ Mr Punnu wagged a finger.

‘And beer and chicken?’ I said.

“That wasn’t allowed from before anyway,’ Sendil said. Everyone around me nodded as they felt the warm fuzzy feeling of having set rules on how to live their life.

I wondered where I’d take Ananya the next time.

20

'I am good at chemistry. I need help in physics,' Manjunath, nerd-embryo and Ananya's younger brother, spoke with eh energy of a rooster. His eyebrows went up and down as he spoke, in sync with the three rows of ash on his forehead.

I had come for my first class. Ananya had left for Madurai the night before for a weeklong sales trip. My head hurt from waking up early. Ananya's mother had sent coffee to Manju's room. It didn't help.

Neither did the fact that I had only read up chemistry.

"let's revise it anyways,' I said and opened my sheets.

'Hydrocarbons?' he said as he saw my notes. 'I've done this thee times.'

I offered him a problem and he solved it in two minutes. I tried a harder one, and he did it in the same time. A tape played in the next room. It sounded like a chorus of women marching towards the army.

'M.S. Subbulaxmi,' Manju said, noticing my worried expression. 'Devotional music.'

I nodded as I flipped through the chemistry books to find a problem challenging enough for the little Einstein.

'Every Tamilian house plays it in the morning.'

I wondered if Ananya would play it in our house after we got married. My mother would have serious trauma with that sound. The chants became stronger with every passing minute.

'What is IIT like?' he asked.

I told him about my former college, filtering out all the spicy bits that occurred in my life.

'I want to do aeronautics,' Manju said. At his age, I didn't even know that word.

He took out his physics textbook after an hour. He gave me a problem and I asked for time to solve it. He nodded and read the next chapter. The tutor was being tutored.

I passed the rest of the hour learning physics from Manju. I stood up to leave. I reached the living room where Ananya's dad was making slow love to *The Hindu*. Ananya had instructed me to spend as much time with her father as possible. I waited for ten minutes until he finished his article.

'Yes?'

'Nothing,' I said. 'I finished the class.'

'Good,' he said and flipped another page.

'How's the bank, uncle?'

He glanced up from the newspaper, surprised. 'Which bank?'

'Your bank.' I cleared my throat. 'How is your job?'

'What?' he said, stumped by the stupidity of the question. 'What is there in job? Job is same.'

'Yes, sure,' I said.

I stood for another five minutes, not sure of what I should do. I couldn't compete with *The Hindu*, and a fresh one came every day.

'I'll leave now, uncle,' I said.

'OK,' he said.

I had reached the door when he called out, 'Breakfast?'

'I'll have it in the office.'

'Where is your office?'

'Anna Salai,' I said.

'That's on my way. I leave at eight-thirty. I can drop you,' he said.

I realised eight-thirty would mean I'd reach an hour later than my boss. It didn't work for me. But the lift also meant I could be in this house for another two hours and be in the car alone with my father-in-law-in-courtship.

'That's perfect. I have to reach at the same time,' I said.

'Good,' he said and went back to his paper again.

We sat for breakfast at seven-thirty. Ananya's father went to the temple room to pray, and came back with the customary three grey stripes on his forehead. I wondered if I should go pray too, but wasn't sure how I'd explain the three stripes in office along with my lateness.

We had idlis for breakfast, and Ananya's mother put fifty of them in front of us. We ate quietly. Ananya had told me they never spoke much anyway. The best way to fit in was to never talk.

'More chutney?' Ananya's mother's question (and my shaking my head) was the only insightful conversation we had during the meal.

Uncle reversed his Fiat from the garage. He peeked out to look at me several times. I wasn't sure if he wanted to avoid me or make a direct hit.

'Sit,' uncle said. I went around the car to sit next to him. Sitting with my girlfriend's father in a car brought traumatic memories. I took deep breaths. This is not the same situation, play cool, I said to myself several times.

Uncle drove at a speed of ten an hour, and I wondered what reason I'd give my boss for not coming to office two hours ago. Autos, scooters and even some manual-powered vehicles like rickshaws came close to overtaking us.

I wanted to talk but couldn't think of any trouble-free topic. I opened my office bag with the dubious 'Citi never sleeps' logo and took out my research reports to read. Dot com stocks had lost 25% last week. The analysts who had predicted that these stocks would triple every hour now claimed the market had gone into self-correct mode. Self-correct – it sounded so intelligent and clever it sort of took out the pain away from people who had lost their life savings. It also made you sound dumb if you'd ask why didn't the market self-correct earlier? Or the more basic, what the fuck do you mean by self-correct anyway?

I had two clients who had lost ten lakh each coming to visit me today. With my IIMA degree I had to come up with a sleight of hand to make the losses disappear. the car came to a halt near a red light.

'You wrote those reports?' uncle asked.

I shook my head. 'It's the research group,' I said.

'Then what you do at the bank?' he was more rhetorical.

'Customer service,' I said, not sure how anything I did was service. Asking people to give you their money and scraping away at it wasn't service.

'Do you know how to write those reports?' he said.

The cars behind us began to honk. The Fiat didn't start instantly. Uncle made two attempts in vain.

'Illa service quality,' he cursed at his car as he pulled the choke. I kept the reports inside as I became ready to push the car. Fortunately, the car started at the third attempt.

'I can write them, why?' I said, answering his earlier question.

'Nothing. Stupid joint venture my bank has done. Now they want us to submit a business plan. And that GM has asked me.'

'I can help,' I screamed like a boy scout.

'Raascal,' he said.

'Huh?'

'That GM Verma. In my thirty years at the bank I haven't done any report. Now I have to make a pinpoint presentation as well.'

'Powerpoint presentation?' I asked.

'Yes, that one. Intentionally rascal gave me something I don't understand,' uncle said.

'I can help,' I said. Maybe I had found a way to bond with uncle.

'No need,' uncle said, his voice serious. He realised he had opened up more than he should have.

'You get off here,' uncle said and drove to a road corner. 'Citibank is hardly hundred metres.'

I stepped out of the car. I said thanks three times and waved him goodbye. He didn't respond. He put his hand on the gear-shift.

'Don't meet Ananya too much. We are simple people, we don't say much. But don't spoil her name in our community,' he said.

'Uncle, but...'

'I know you are classmates and you are helping Manju. We can be grateful, we can feed you, but we can't let Ananya marry you.'

I stood at the traffic intersection. Autos blared their horns at each other as if in angry conversation. It was hardly the place to convince someone about the most important decision of your life.

‘Uncle, but ...’ I said again.

Uncle folded his hands to before pressing the accelerator. The car started to move. *Fuck, how do I respond to folded hands?* I thought. Uncle drove past me. Like a defeated insurance salesman, I lifted my bag and walked towards the bank.

21

‘Welcome sir, welcome to State Bank of India,’ Bala said. His tone couldn’t hide his anger, thereby ruining the sarcasm of his lines. He sat on my desk, waiting for the exact joyous moment when he could squash me.

‘I’m really sorry, my auto met with an accident,’ I lied.

“Your chummery servant said you left at five,’ he said.

‘You called my chummery? It’s only nine. Isn’t that the official time anyway?’

‘No, this is Citibank. Not a public sector bank,’ he said.

‘So, people who work here cannot have life,’ I mumbled.

‘What?’

‘Nothing. Ms Sreenivas is coming at ten today,’ I said.

‘And you haven’t prepared for it. Have you read the reports?’

‘Yes, I have. But the tricky part is she is down ten lakh. And that is because she believed these reports. So no matter how well I read these reports, she won’t trust them. Can I sit on my chair?’ I asked.

Bala stared at me, shocked by my defiance. I took my seat. ‘You told me to push these stocks,’ I said, ‘and now our clients are down. Ms Sreenivas is an old lady. She will panic. I want you to be prepared.’

‘Prepared for what?’

‘That she, and some other clients too, could move funds elsewhere.’

‘How? How can they? This is Citibank,’ Bala said.

‘Because even as the Citi never sleeps, we make our customers weep.’

Ms Sreenivas' panic mode was entertaining enough to attract bankers from other groups to come to our area. First, she spoke to me in Tamil for two minutes. When she realised I didn't know the language, she switched to English.

'You, you said this will double. It's down seventy percent-aa,' Ms Sreenivas said.

'Actually madam, the market went into self-correction mode,' I said. I now understood the purpose of complex research terms. They deflect uncomfortable questions that have no answer.

'But, I've lost ten lakh!' she screamed.

'Madam, stock market goes up and down. We do have some other products that are less risky,' I said, capitalizing on her misery to sell more.

'Forget it. I am done with Citibank. I told you to do a fixed deposit. You didn't. Now I move my account to Vysya Bank.'

My sales rep brought several snacks and cold drinks for her. Ms Sreenivas didn't budge.

'Madam, but Citibank is a much better name than Vysya,' I said.

'Give me the account closing documents,' Ms Sreenivas said. We had no choice. First hour in office, strike one. The TV in the reception showed the CNBC channel. Internet stocks had lost another five percent that day.

In the next two weeks, our most trusting customers, hence the most gullible ones to whom we had peddled companies that did nothing more than make a website, lost a total of two crore. My own customers' losses were limited to the two ladies, as I could never sell those companies well anyway. Bala, however, with his empire of smart people who rip off rich people, had to answer country headquarters in Mumbai.

'I have seven complaints,' the country head of the customer service group said in a conference call.

'Sir, it is just an overreaction to the volatility,' Bala said.

'Don't quote from the research report. I've read it,' the country head said.

The call ended. Bala's face had turned pale. The bosses had decided to visit the Chennai branch. I first thought I imagined it, but it was true; Bala shivered a little at the news. Mumbai said we shouldn't have marketed Internet stocks to

individual investors, let alone housewives, in the first place. Of course, they never complained when the commission kept coming in. but now five customers had closed their accounts and one customer had sent a letter all the way to the CEO of Citibank in New York.

At my weekly sales meeting, I told my sales reps not to sell Chennai customers anything apart from fixed deposits, gold and saris.

‘Sir, we don’t sell saris,’ one of my reps clarified.

‘Sorry, I was trying to be funny. We don’t sell gold either, right?’

‘We do. Gold-linked deposit, sir,’ she said.

Yes, I didn’t even know my group’s products. Actually, I didn’t even know why I was doing this job. I nodded and smiled. In customer service, you need to smile more than a toothpaste model.

‘Is it true that Ms Sreenivas lost ten lakh?’ another of my lady customers walked into the bank. She chuckled, and sat close to the sales rep to get the full lowdown. Too bad we couldn’t give her the details due to confidentiality reasons. We couldn’t offer returns, but at least we could have given gossip. Maybe that would lure customers.

‘Krish, come here,’ Bala came to me like a petrified puppy at seven in the evening.

I had packed my ‘Citi never sleeps’ bag to go back home and sleep. We had our bosses coming in two days. I had spent the last two nights making presentations for them. It was the crappiest, most thankless job in Tamil Nadu. No matter how wonderful I made my slides, the numbers were so bad, we’d be screamed at anyway. Last night I had reached home at three and then woke up again at five to reach brother-in-law dearest. I didn’t want Bala, I wanted a pillow.

‘Bala, I ...’ I stopped mid-sentence as he had already turned towards his cabin, expecting me to follow him.

I went into Bala’s office. He shut the door softly as possible. He drew the blinds and put the phone off the hook. Either he wants to fire me or molest me, I though.

‘How is it going?’ he whispered, quite unnecessarily as people had already left for the day.

‘Fine. I sent you the presentation. You approved, right?’ I said. He had given me an OK in the afternoon. The last thing I wanted was another night out.

‘Yeah, that’s fine. Listen buddy, I need a favour from you.’

Bala had never called me buddy. The room smelt coconutty and fishy. The coconut came from Bala’s hair, the fish from his unspoken intention.

‘What favour?’ I asked without smiling.

‘See Krish, this job, my career, it is everything to me. I have given my life to this bank.’

I nodded. *Come to the point, buddy*, I thought.

‘And you, as you will admit, aren’t into it as much as me. Don’t take it the wrong way.’

He was hundred percent right. But when someone tells you to not take it the wrong way, you have to take it the wrong way. Besides, I had spent the last three nights working hard with only ATM guards for company. I deserved better.

‘That is hundred percent false,’ I said. ‘I’m dying from work. I do whatever you want me to do. I sold that crap Internet ...’

‘Easy, easy,’ Bala shushed me.

‘There is nobody here. We are not planning a James Bond mission that we have to whisper,’ I said.

Corporate types love to pretend their life is exciting. The whispers, fist-pumping and animated hand gestures are all designed to lift our job description from what it really is - that of an overpaid clerk.

‘I’m not doubting your hard work. But see, in corporate life, we have to look after each other.’

‘What? How?’ If he didn’t come to the point in two seconds, I would slap him. In my imagination, I already had.

‘I am your boss, so I can look after you anyway. But today you have a chance to look after me.’

I kept quiet.

'The country manager is coming. They will ask how the Internet stocks sales to housewives came about. I have to take the heat anyway. But if you could ...'

'Could what?' I prompted, just to make the scumbag say it. He didn't.

'You want me to take the blame?' I hazarded a guess.

He gave a brief nod.

'Wow. That's unbelievable, Bala. I'm a trainee. Why will they believe me anyway?'

'You are from IIMA. It is conceivable you had a big say from early on.'

'And if I say it, my career is fucked.'

'No, you are a trainee. I have to recommend your promotion. Consider that done anyway. But if I am held responsible, I don't get a promotion, ever.'

'You are responsible,' I stared into his eyes.

'Please Krish,' Bala said.

The boss-subordinate relationship had changed. Bala begged me for help. I realised the power I could hold over him if I gave in. I could come to office like sane people. I could leave early. I could snooze at my desk. OK, so maybe my career at the Citi overpaid clerks' club would get affected. So what?

I could have said yes then, but I wanted him to grovel some more. I kept quiet.

'The country manager as it is doesn't like me. He is North Indian. He will forgive you but not me,' Bala said. I wondered if he would cry. I could have enjoyed the show longer but I also wanted to go home and rest.

'I'll see what I can do,' I stood up.

'Is that a yes?' Bala said, his eyes expectant.

'Good night, sir,' I said, emphasizing the last word.

22

My father never calls me. I have no idea why he did that night. I have no idea why he did that night. I wanted to sleep before the misery of tuition and office began all over again. But at eleven that night, Ramanujan knocked on the door.

‘What?’ I called out. Since the day Ananya visited, I hardly spoke to my flatmates.

‘There’s a call for you.’

‘Who is it?’ Even Ananya never called me this late.

‘Your father. Can you ask him not to call at this hour?’ Ramanujan yawned.

I froze at the mention of my father. I prayed my mother was OK. Why would he call me? ‘Hello?’

‘Am I speaking to my son?’

I found his addressing me as his son strange. We had never had a one-to-one conversation for the last three years.

‘It’s Krish,’ I said.

‘That’s my son only, no?’

‘If you say so,’ I said.

Silence followed as two STD pulses passed.

‘I’m listening,’ he said.

‘To what?’

‘To whatever my son has to say to me.’

‘There isn’t anything left to say. Why have you called so late?’ I said in an angry voice.

‘You sent your mother your first salary cheque?’

‘Yes,’ I said after a pause.

‘Congratulations,’ he said.

'Is mom OK? I hope you are not calling me for some guilt trip of yours. Because if mom is not OK ...' I said, separating my words with pauses.

'Your mother is fine. She is proud of you,' he said.

'Anything else?'

'How's life?'

'It's none of your business,' I said.

'Is this the way to speak to your father?' he shouted.

'I don't speak to you,' I said, 'in case you didn't notice.'

'And I am trying to increase communication,' he said, his voice still loud.

I could have hung up the phone right then, but I didn't want him to take his anger out on my mother. I kept quiet as he ranted about how I had let him down as a son. He didn't say anything he hadn't in the last twenty years. I also knew that once the monologue started, it would take a while to stop. I put the phone on the table and opened the fridge. I took out an apple and a bottle of water. I went to the kitchen, cut the apple into little pieces and came back. I had two bites and drank a glass of water. Squawks came from the phone receiver.

After finishing the apple, I picked up the phone.

'You have no qualities I can be proud of. These degrees mean nothing. Just because you send you mother money, you think you can boss around. I think a person like you ...' he was saying when I put the phone down again. I picked it up again after I finished the apple.

'I said, are you listening?' His voice was trembling.

'I am,' I said. 'Now it is late. Your bill must also be quiet high. May I go to sleep?'

'You have no respect.'

'You said that already. Now, can we sleep? Good night,' I said.

'Good night,' he said and hung up. No matter how mad they are, army people still believe in courtesies. I am sure Indian and Pakistani officers wish each other before they blow each other's brains off.

I came back to bed. I didn't want my father's chapter in my life again. No father is better than a bad father. Plus right now I had to deal with another father, who had folded his hands to keep me away from a daughter I so badly wanted to be with. And I have Bala and loser flatmates and psycho landlord and horrible sambhar smells everywhere in this city. A dozen random thoughts spilled out in my brain right before going to bed. These thoughts swarm around like clumsy fishes, and my poor little brain begged – *guys, I need some rest. Do you mind?* But the thoughts didn't go away. Each fish had an attention deficit disorder. The Bala thought showed visions of me jabbing him with something sharp. The Ananya's dad thought made me think about a dozen post-facto one liners I could have said when uncle folded his hands – *But I love her, sir; But you should get to know me, uncle; You realise we can run away, you Hindu-reading loser.*

Some people are lucky. They lie down, close their eyes and like those like those imported dolls your Dubai relatives give you, go off to sleep. I have to shut fifty channels in my brain, one click at a time. One hour later, I had shut the final thought of how I'd admit I taught housewives to play with radioactive stocks.

23

‘Ready?’ Bala jollied me with coffee in the morning. Yes, Mr Balakrishnan, branch head of customer services, brought me coffee in a mug. Too bad he didn’t carry it in a tray.

‘Doesn’t take much preparation to present yourself as stupid,’ I said and took the coffee. I noticed the mug had become wet at the bottom. Bala picked up a tissue from my desk for me. I could get used to this, I thought.

We met in the conference room two hours later. Bala loaded up the presentation. True to character, he had removed my name from the title slide. Like all banking presentations in every department of every bank in India, it started with the 1991 liberalisation and how it presents tremendous opportunity for India.

‘As you can see, the IT space has seen tremendous volatility in the last three months,’ Bala said, pointing to a graph that only went down.

Our country head, Anil Mathur, had come on the first flight to Chennai. His day had started bad as he couldn’t get a business class seat last minute and had to rub shoulders with the common people. His grumpy expression continued to worsen during the presentation.

Anil was forty years old and seen as a young turk on his way up. Citi thrived on and loved the start system. People introduced him as ‘This is Anil, MD. He is a star performer.’

Again, there is nothing starry to do in a bank anyway. It is another thing Citi invented to reduce the dullness of our job. However, when Anil entered the room, some Chennai bankers’ eyes lit up, much like the auto driver who saw Rajni’s poster.

‘And that in short, has led to the circumstances we are in today,’ Bala said as he ended his hour-long speech. I couldn’t believe he tagged his talk this short.

Anil didn’t respond. He looked around the room. Chennai trainees avoid eye contact anyway, especially when it comes to authority. He looked at Bala and Bala looked at me. I nodded; I’d be the suicide mission today.

Anil’s cell-phone rang. He took it out of his pocket. His secretary had called from Mumbai.

‘What do you mean wait-listed for business class? I am not coming back like I did this morning sitting cramped with these Madrasis.’

Apart from me and Anil, everyone in the room was offended. However, since Anil is the boss, everybody smiled like it was a cute romantic joke.

Anil stood up with his phone. ‘And why do I have a Honda City to pick me up? Tell them, I am eligible for BMW if they don’t have Mercedes ... yes, of course, I am.’ He said and hung up the phone.

He let out a huge sigh and rubbed his face. It is a tough life when you have to fight for basic rights every day.

‘OK, focus, focus,’ he said to himself and everyone in the room straightened their backs.

‘Sir, as I was saying ...’ Bala started again. Anil had a flight back in four hours. I guess Bala hoped if he kept presenting, time would run out for Anil to ask tough questions.

“Bala, you have said a lot,’ Anil said. ‘All I care about is why have you lost seven big customers in a month. In every other market we have grown.’

All of us studied the floor.

‘Two crore? How can retail customers lose two crore? They come to save their money in the bank, not lose it,’ Anil said. Such truisms had led him to become the star in the jargon-filled bank.

‘So, whose big idea was it to sell these ladies net stocks?’ Anil asked.

‘Sir,’ Bala said and looked at me. Everyone turned to me. I had become guilty by collective gaze.

‘You are?’ Anil asked.

“Krish, sir,’ I said.

‘You are from Chennai?’ Anil said, puzzled at my accent that didn’t match the rest of the table.

‘No, I’m from Delhi.’

‘Punjabi?’

I nodded.

Anil didn't answer. He just laughed. The sadistic laugh of seeing a fish out of water gasp for life. 'What happened? HR screwed up?' Anil said. His phone rang again. The secretary confirmed business class and a BMW pickup at the airport. Anil asked her to make sure it is a 5-series at least.

'Remember the Tata Tea deal we did with BankAm? I came back with that idiot MD from BankAm and the car company sends me a Toyota and a 5-series for him. Can you imagine what I went through?' Anil emphasized again. The secretary confirmed she wouldn't make him slum it in a car that cost less than an apartment. Calmness spread in the room as Anil's mood improved.

'Where was I?' Anil said and looked at me. He laughed again. 'Which college are you from?'

'IIMA,' I said.

'Salute, sir,' Anil said and mock-saluted me.

I didn't brag about my college, you asshole, I wanted to say. He got the name out of me.

'I went to IIMC. I was on the waitlist for IIMA but they never called me. I guess I am not as smart as you,' Anil said.

I had no clue how to answer that question. Another trainee in the room was from IIMC and he introduced himself. They hi-fived before Anil turned to me again.

'But who cares, I became the country manager and many of your IIMA seniors didn't,' Anil said and winked at me.

Obviously you still care, you obnoxious, insecure prick, I said to myself even as I smiled. What would life be without mental dialogue.

'So, you had the idea of selling Internet stocks to housewives?' Anil asked after he touched down from his gloat-flight. 'And Bala, you didn't stop him.'

'Sir, I always try to encourage young talent. Plus, IIMA, I thought he'd know,' Bala said, picking on Anil's resentment against my bluest of the blue-blooded institute.

'IIMA, yeah right,' Anil said. 'You have cost the bank more business than you can ever make back in five years.'

I wondered if I should cancel my deal with Bala. Even the personalized coffee didn't seem worth it.

'What about monitoring? Bala, you didn't monitor when the losses started?'

'I was getting more business, sir,' Bala said.

We had a lunch-break. I didn't join the group. One, I had to prepare for IIT trigonometry for the class tomorrow with brother-in-law. Two, I didn't need any more slamming. And three, the food was South Indian special, which I had begun to hate by now and I was sure Anil would too.

Post-lunch, Anil wrapped up the meeting. 'I want good customer numbers. Either bring those customers back or win new ones, I don't care. And please have better food next time.'

'We will, sir, we are working super hard,' Bala said.

The other trainees nodded. Apart from the IIMC guy, they hadn't spoken a word during the meeting.

'I can tell you this Internet debacle will lead to layoffs across the bank. And if we see Chennai at the bottom, literally and figuratively, there will be layoffs.' Anil said and horror showed on all faces at his last words.

'And you, HR error,' Anil said and tapped my shoulder. 'You need to buck up big time.'

The BMW came to the branch to take Anil and our anxieties away. Bala came to my desk after we had come back to our seats. 'Thanks, buddy. I owe you,' he said.

'Big time, buddy, big time,' I said.

24

I figured it must be a special occasion when I heard excessive frying sounds from Ananya's kitchen. I had completed two months of tuitions and Manju had become smarter than the kids in the Complan and Bournvita ads. I could bet one month of my after-tax, PF and HRA salary that Manju would crack IIT, medical or any draconian entrance exam known to man. Most of it was his own work, and my waking up at five had little to do with it.

'What's going on,' I said and sneezed twice. The pungent smell of burnt chillies flared my nostrils.

'Special cooking for special guests,' Manju said, while continuing to solve his physics numerical.

'Who?'

'Harish, from the bay area,' Manju said.

'Harish who?'

Another fryer went on the stove. This time smells of mustard, curry leaves and onions reached us. If this was one of those prize-winning Indian novels, I'd spend two pages on how wonderful those smells were. However, the only reaction I had was a coughing fit and teary eyes.

'You are rhumba sensitive,' Manju said and looked up at me in disgust. He stood up and went to the door. 'Switch on the exhaust fan, amma,' he screamed and shut the door.

Ananya's mother continued to tackle the contents of the fryer. 'OK, you go for bath. They will come anytime,' Ananya's mother said and went to max volume, 'Ananya! Are you ready?'

'Who is Harish?' I asked again as Manju refused to look up from his problem.

'The nakshatram matched no, so they are here. Ok, so g is 9.8 metres per second squared and the root of ...' Manju drifted off to the world he knew best, leaving me alone to deal with my world, where a boy was coming to meet my girlfriend to make her his wife.

I yanked Manju's notebook from him.

‘Aiyo, what?’ Manju looked at me shocked.

‘What’s the deal with Harish. Tell me now or I’ll tell your mother you watch porn,’ I said.

Manju looked stunned. ‘I don’t watch porn,’ he said in a scared voice.

‘Don’t lie to me,’ I said. Every boy watches porn.

‘Only once I s ...saw a blue film, at my friend’s house, by mistake,’ he stuttered.

‘How can you watch it by mistake?’

‘It belonged to my friend’s dad. Please don’t tell amma.’

His face, even his spectacles looked terrified. I closed the books. ‘Tell me all about Harish. How did this happen?’

Manju told me about Harish, the poster boy of the perfect Tamilian groom. Radha aunty had pitched Harish for the last two years. He fit every criteria applied by Indian parents to make him a worthwhile match for Ananya. He was Tamilian, a Brahmin and an Iyer (and those are three separate things, and non-compliance in any can get you disqualified). He had studied in IIT Chennai and had scored a GPA of 9.45 (yes, it was advertised to the Swamis)’

He went on to do an MS with full scholarship and now worked in Cisco Systems, an upcoming Silicon Valley company. He never drank or ate meat or smoked (or had fun, by extension) and had a good knowledge of Carnatic music and Bharatnatyam. He had a full half-inch-thick moustache, his own house in the San Francisco suburbs, a white Honda Accord and stock options that, apart from the last three months, had doubled every twelve minutes. He even had a telescope he used to see galaxies on the weekend (I told you he had no fun). Manju was more excited at the prospect of seeing the telescope and thought it reason enough for his sister to marry that guy.

‘He said you can actually see the colours on the rings of Saturn,’ Manju said, excited.

‘You spoke to him?’

‘He called. Couple of times,’ Manju said.

‘Ananya spoke to him?’

'No. he used to call when she wasn't at home. Anyway, until the nakshatram matches, the boy and the girl are not allowed to talk.'

'Nakshatram what?' I asked. The list of Tamilian hoops one needs to jump before getting married seemed infinite.

'Horoscope. It is a must. If they don't match, boy and girl's side don't talk. But they have matched for akka and him.'

I thought about my own family. The only nakshatram we think about is the division of petrol pumps when we have to see the girl.

'You are a science whiz kid who wants to see Saturn rings. And you accept that people whose horoscopes don't match shouldn't talk?' I said.

'That's how it is in our culture,' Manju said, his hands itching to get to his workbook. I gave him back his notes.

'And he is coming now?' I said.

'Yes, for breakfast. And please, don't snatch my notebook again.'

'I am sorry,' I said and stood up. I wanted to have a showdown with Ananya about this. Surely, she'd have known a bit more about his visit. But for now, I wanted to get out.

'Bye, Manju,' I said as I turned to leave.

'Krish bhaiya, can I ask you one thing?' he said.

'What?' I said.

'Can something bad happen if you watch blue films?'

I stared at him.

'I won't, I promise, I just wanted to know,' he said.

'If you just watch them?'

'Just watching ...and,' he said and hesitated, 'and if you do something else afterwards.'

'Why don't you ask your appa?'

'Aiyo, what are you saying?'

'You could become blind,' I said with a serious face.

'Really? He said, 'how is that possible?'

'Be careful,' I winked at him and left.

'Welcome, welcome,' greetings had started at the entrance even before I could leave the house.

A crowd had gathered at the main door – Ananya's dad and mom, Shobha athai, three other Kanjeevaram-clad aunties and two random uncles in safari suits became the welcome party. They received Harish like an astronaut who had returned from the first Indian lunar mission. The only time grown-ups get excited about young people is when young people are getting married and the old people control the proceedings. I had come to Ananya's house several times, and I had received a welcome no better than the guy who came to collect the cable bill. But Harish had it all. Aunties looked at him like he was a cuddly two-year-old, only he was fifty times the size and had a moustache that could scare any cuddly two-year-old. He wore sunglasses, quite unnecessary at seven in the morning, apart from showing off his sense of misplaced style. He had come with his parents, a snug Tamilian family who walked into the room with their overachiever in shades. Fortunately, he removed them when he sat on the sofa.

Ananya's father noticed me with a confused expression.

'Uncle, I was leaving,' I said. 'Sorry. I came for Manju's tuitions.'

'Had breakfast?' he asked.

'No,' I said.

'Then sit,' he said. The firmness in his voice made me obey instantly. I wanted to wriggle out of it, but a part of me wanted to see the drama unfold. Uncle's attention shifted to the new guests. Maybe he had made me stay intentionally. I perched in a corner chair like a domestic servant who is sometimes allowed to watch TV.

The taxi driver came in to ask for his bill and Harish's dad stepped outside to settle it. They couldn't agree on the price and their argument began to heat up.

Harish's dad bargained for the last five rupees even as Harish's mother casually mentioned another of their son's achievement. 'MIT calling him, requesting him to do Ph.D. at their college.'

All the ladies in the room had a mini orgasm. Marble flooring is to a Punjabi what a foreign degree is to a Tamilian.

'But his Cisco boss said, nothing doing. You cannot leave me.' Harish's mother said. Harish kept a constant smile during the conversation.

Manju came into the room and called me.

'What?' I asked, dreading another physics problem.

I went into his room. Ananya sat on his bed, wearing a stunning peacock blue sari – the same colour she wore the day I had proposed to her.

'Go, your groom is waiting,' I said.

'Manju, leave the room,' she said.

Manju had already sat down to study again. 'Aiyo, where should I go?'

'Go and meet the guests. Or help Amma in the kitchen,' Ananya said in a no-nonsense way.

Manju went to the living room with the physics guide.

I turned away from Ananya.

'I'm sorry,' she said.

'Who the fuck invented the word sorry? How can there be just one word to answer for anything one does. Tomorrow you could marry Mr Sunglasses outside, and then say sorry. What am I supposed to say?'

'Don't overreact. I am doing it to fob off Shobha aunty. I still have the final say. I'll say no.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'Because this is not important. You saw the petrol pump girl, didn't you?'

'But I told you later. And it wasn't a formal thing. My mother went to visit Pammi aunty.'

‘And neither is this formal. My parents said Harish is only coming for a casual visit.’

Oh, so people match horoscopes casually?’

‘It is the first step. And Shobha aunty did it. Krish, listen ...’

‘Ananya!’ a Tamil-accented scream filled the room.

‘I love you,’ she said, ‘and I have to go now.’ She brushed past me to the door.

‘Why are you wearing this stunning sari?’ I placed my hand on the bolt to stop her.

‘Because my mother chose it for me. Now, can I go or do you want appa to come here?’

‘Let’s elope,’ I said.

‘Let’s not give up,’ she stood up on her toes to kiss me. The taste of strawberry lip-gloss lingered on m lips.

I came outside after five minutes. The hubbub over Harish had settled down a little. The men opened their newspapers. The women gave each other formal smiles like ballet dancers. The groom took out his latest Motorola Startac mobile phone, checking messages. Ananya’s mother served her standard fossilised snake snacks. No one spoke to each other. In a Punjabi home, if a similar silence occurred, you could assume that something terrible has happened – like someone has died or there is a property dispute or someone forgot to put butter in the black daal. But this is Ananya’s home protocol. You meet in an excited manner, you serve bland snacks and you open the newspaper or exchange dead looks.

My re-entry made everyone notice me. Ananya’s mother seemed surprised. Ananya sat next to her and faced Harish’s parents. I occupied my corner chair.

‘Manju’s tutor,’ Ananya’s mother said. Everyone looked at me, the tutor who came to teach in a corporate suit.

‘He is Ananya akka’s classmate,’ Manju said, restoring some status to me.

‘You also went to IIMA? I have many colleagues who are your seniors,’ Harish said.

‘Really? That’s nice,’ I said. I wanted to shove the spiral snacks up his moustache-covered nose, but I kept a diplomatic smile.

Ananya's father spoke to Harish's father in Tamil. 'Something something Citibank Chennai posted something. Something something Punjabi fellow.'

Everyone nodded and felt relieved after my credentials of being a Punjabi made me a safe outsider.

'Talk, Ananya,' Ananya's mother whispered to her.

'How long are you here for?' Ananya asked as her bangles jingled. She really didn't have to wear the bangles.

'Two weeks. Then I have to go for our annual conference to Bali,' he said.

'Bali?' one of Ananya's aunts said.

'Bali is an island in Indonesia, an archipelago. It is eight hours flying time from here via Singapore,' Harish's mother said.

Everyone nodded as they absorbed the little nugget of knowledge before breakfast. Ananya's family loved knowledge, irrespective of whether they ever used it.

We moved to the dining table, or rather the dining floor. Ananya's mother had already kept the banana leaves. I found them a little greener than usual, perhaps my jealousy reflected in them.

Aunties loaded up Harish's leaf.

'This is too much,' Harish said, pointing to the six idlis on his leaf. 'Does anyone want one?' He picked up an idli and placed it in Ananya's leaf.

'Wow!' all the aunties screamed in unison.

'See, how much care he is taking of her already. You are so lucky, Ananya,' an aunt said as I almost tore a piece of banana leaf and ate it.

I saw the bowl of sambhar in the middle. I wondered if I should pick it up and upturn it on Harish's head. *She can take her own idlis, idiot, why don't you go drown in Bali,* I thought.

Harish thought it really funny to shift everything he was served to Ananya. He transferred parts of upma, pongal, chutney and banana chips from his leaf to hers. *Really Harish, did anybody teach you not to stretch a bad joke too far? And all you aunts, can you please stop sniggering so as to no encourage this moron?*

'We must decide the date keeping in mind the US holiday calendar,' Shobha aunty said and I felt she was moving way, way too fast.

'Easy, aunty, easy,' Ananya said.

Thanks, Ananya madam, that is so nice of you to finally impart some sense to these people. 'You OK?' Manju offered an idli to me. I had spent two months with him. He could sense the turmoil in me.

'I'm good,' I said.

The breakfast continued. And then Ananya's mother did something that paled all the idli-passing and date-setting comments. She began to cry.

'Amma?' Ananya said as she stood up and came to her mother.

Amma shook her head. Manju looked at her but didn't stop eating. The uncles pretended nothing had happened.

'What, Radha?' Suruchi aunty said as she put a hand on Amma's shoulder.

'Nothing, I am so happy. I am crying for that,' she said in such an emotional voice even I got a lump in my throat. All the other aunts had moist eyes. Harish's mother hugged Ananya's mother. I looked at Ananya. She rolled her eyes.

'How quickly our children grow up,' one aunt said, ignoring the small fact that with the children, she'd grown into an old woman, too.

I'm going to get you all, I will, I swore to myself as I went to wash my hands.

25

‘Why don’t you tell them! This gradual strategy is obviously not working,’ I said as I opened the menu.

We had come to Amethyst, a charming teahouse set in an old colonial bungalow. It is one of the few redeeming aspects of the city. Set in a one-acre plot, the bungalow is on two levels. Outside the bungalow there are grand verandahs with cane furniture and potted plants with large leaves. Waiters bring eclectic drinks like jamun iced tea and mint and ginger coolers along with expensive dishes with feta cheese in them. It is a favourite haunt of stylish Chennai ladies and couples so madly in love, they feel a hundred bucks for jamun mixed with soda was OK.

‘I’ll have the jamun iced and chicken sandwich, and some scones and cream, please.’ Ananya said.

‘And some water, please,’ I said to the waiter.

‘Still or sparkling, sir?’ the waiter said.

‘Whatever you had a bath with this morning,’ Krish said.

‘Sir?’ the waiter said, taken aback, ‘tap water, sir.’

‘Same, get me that,’ I said.

‘I have told them, of course. They don’t agree,’ Ananya said, as we reverted to our topic.

‘Is Mr Harish history?’

‘Finally, though it will take two years to make Shobha athai OK again. She is like – tell me one thing wrong with Harish.’

‘He can’t get a woman on his own,’ I said.

‘Shut up, Krish,’ Ananya laughed. ‘You know how I finally closed it?’

‘Did you tell him about me?’

‘Sort of.’

‘Sort of?’ I said, my voice loud. ‘I am not Mr Sort Of. I am The Guy.’

'Yeah, but I can't tell him exactly. How would he feel? My boyfriend sat with me when he came to see me.'

'Imagine how I felt. Anyway, what did you tell him?'

'He asked me, rather hinted, about my virginity.'

'He did not! I will kill that bastard,' I said, my face red.

Ananya laughed. 'Jealousy is rather enjoyable emotion to watch,' she observed.

'Funny.'

'He just said ... wait let me remember. Yes, he said, are you still pure or something,' she giggled.

'What a loser. What is he looking for – ghee?' I asked.

Ananya laughed uncontrollably. She held her stomach as she spoke. 'Wait, you'll die if I told you my response.'

'And that is?'

'I told him – Harish, if there is an entrance exam for virginity, you can be sure I won't top it,' Ananya said.

'You did not! And then?'

'And then the Cisco guy hung up the phone. No more Harish, finite. Radha aunty said now Harish also doesn't like me. Yipee!'

The waiter brought us our drinks. The contents looked like water after you've dipped several paintbrushes in it. The jamun tea tasted different, though different doesn't translate into nice. Amethyst is about ambience, not nourishment.

'Ananya, we need to bring this to closure. I'm not getting traction with your parents. Manju maybe, but others barely acknowledge me.'

'You will. In fact, that's why I called you here today. You have a chance to score with dad.'

'I can't. I told you he folded his hands at me.'

'He is dying doing his presentation. No one in Bank of Baroda has ever made a business plan. He doesn't know computers. It is crazy.'

'I offered help. He said no.'

'He won't say no now. I could help him but I am travelling most of the time. And if you help him, it may work.'

'*May*, the key word is *may*. Can be replaced just as easily with *may not*,' I said.

'Try,' Ananya said and placed her hands on mine. It was probably the only restaurant in Chennai she would try such a stunt. Here, it looked sort of OK.

'First your brother, then your father. If nothing else, I'll be your family tutor,' I said as I sipped the last few drops of my tea.

'And my lover,' Ananya winked.

'Thanks. And what about your mother? How can I make her cry in happiness like the purity-seeking Harish?'

Ananya threw up her hands. 'Don't ask me about mom,' she said. 'One, she gives me a guilt trip about Harish everyday. And two, Chennai has put her in her place about her Carnatic music abilities. She has stopped singing altogether. And that makes her even more miserable, which creates her own self-guilt trip, which is then transferred to me and the cycle continues. Even I can't help her with this. Work on dad for now.'

I nodded as Ananya paused to catch her breath.

'Thanks for bearing this,' she said and fed me a scone dipped in cream. I licked cream off her fingers. Little things like these kept me going.

'Easy, this is a public place,' she said.

She pulled her hand back as the waiter arrived with the bill. I paid and left him a tip bigger than my daily lunch budget.

'Hey, you want to go dancing?' she asked.

'Dancing? You have an eight o'clock curfew. How can we go dancing?'

'Because in Chennai we go dancing in the afternoon. Let's go, Sheraton has a nice DJ.'

'At three in the afternoon?'

'Yes, everybody goes. They banned nightclubs, so we have afternoon clubs.'

We took an auto to the Sheraton. I am not kidding, a hundred youngsters in party clothes waited outside in the sunny courtyard. The disco opened in ten minutes. Everyone went inside and the lights were switched off. The bar started business. The DJ put on the latest Rajni Tamil track. The crowd went crazy as everyone apart from me registered the song.

Ananya moved her body to the music. She danced extremely well, as did most others trained in Bharatnatyam while growing up.

‘Naan onnai kadalikaren,’ she said ‘I love you’ in Tamil. I took her in my arms.

I looked around at the youngsters, doing what they loved despite everyone from their parents to the government banning them from doing so.

Yes, if there can be afternoon discos, Punjabis can marry Tamilians. Rules, after all, are only made so you can work around them.

‘Uncle, Ananya told me you are having trouble with your business plan.’

Uncle braked his car in shock. We never spoke in the Fiat. We had a ritual. I read my reports, he cursed the traffic and the city roads. In twenty minutes, we reached the traffic signal near the Citibank where he dropped me. I thanked him, he nodded, all without eye contact. Today, one week after my Amethyst date, I had made my move. Ananya had gone to Thanjavur on work for five days, and her mother joined her on the trip to see the temples. Ananya had told me it would be the perfect time to offer help. Her father wouldn’t suspect I wanted to come home for Ananya. Plus, more important, he could actually take help from me

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‘Why is she telling you all this?’ His hands clenched on the steering wheel.

‘Actually, I had helped my boss make a business plan,’ I lied.

‘Really?’ His expression softened and he looked at me.

‘MNC banks make presentations all the time,’ I said.

Uncle released the brake as the car moved again.

‘Do you want me to sit down with you?’ I offered as we reached closer to the Citibank signal.

‘You take tuitions for Manju already. Why are you helping us so much?’

I thought hard for an answer. ‘I don’t have anyone in Chennai. No old friends, no family,’ I said.

His eyebrows went up at the last word.

‘Of course, you are also not family,’ I said and his face relaxed again. ‘But it is nice to go to a home.’

I had reached my signal. I opened the door slowly, to allow him time to respond.

‘If you have time, come in the evening. I will show you what I have done.’

‘Oh, OK, I will come tonight,’ I said as uncle drove off. The Fiat left behind a fresh waft of carbon monoxide.

26

'I think it is a great idea,' Bala said. We sat in our priority banking group team meeting. Mumbai had proposed a 'raise spirits' dinner event for our private clients across India. Despite the economic slowdown, they had approved, they had approved a budget for all major centres. Chennai needed it most, given the adventure banking we had subjected our clients to.

'So, we need to brainstorm on which event will work best for Chennai customers,' Bala said.

'An art exhibition,' one executive said.

'Again, we are selling something,' another executive said. 'The focus should be on fun.'

'A fashion show,' said the earlier executive.

'Too bold for our market,' came the counter response.

The discussion continued for ten minutes. All ideas form movie-night to inventing a Kollywood celebrity to calling a chef to prepare an exotic cuisine were discussed.

However, for some reason, none of the ideas clicked. I felt quite useless having nothing to say. But I didn't know what would work for Chennai customers apart from giving them their money back.

'Krish, what do you think?' Bala asked, breaking my daydream of walking hand-in-hand with Ananya in a peacock blue sari.

'Huh?' I said, and realised everyone had turned to me.

'Would you like to contribute?' Bala said. Even though he had cut me slack, on occasion the repressed boss in him came out.

'Music, how about music? Say a musical night?' I suggested.

Excited murmurs ran across the room. Finally, we had an idea without any strong negative objection. However, within music there were a dozen ideas.

'Kutcheri, let's do a kutcheri,' said one.

'What's that?' I said, turning to Saraswati.

Saraswati was a conservative Tamilian agent who spoke only once a year and never waxed her arms. (I admit the latter point is irrelevant but it is hard not to notice these things.)

‘Kutcheri is a Carnatic music concert,’ Saraswati made her point and drifted back to being part of the wall.

‘Hey, I thought we wanted the evening to be fun,’ I said.

‘Carnatic music can be fun,’ said Ravi, another supervisor.

Yes, as much fun as wailing babies in a crowded train, I wanted to say but didn’t. Political correctness is a necessity in Chennai, especially when everyone hates you for being an outsider anyway.

I turned to Bala. ‘We want to raise spirits. Isn’t Carnatic music too serious? Why not have an evening of popular music. Good popular music.’

‘A.R. Rahman, can we get A.R. Rahman?’ said one person.

‘Or Ilaiyaraja,’ said another.

Bala shook his head and waved his arms to say ‘no’. ‘We can’t do such big names. The budget is not that high. And these people attract the press. Last thing you want is some customer telling the press about their losses and us wasting money on such concerts. Mumbai will kill me.’

After two hours of further deliberation that took us to lunch break, we made a few decisions about the event. The concert would be held in Fisherman’s Cove, an upmarket resort on the city outskirts. We’d have three to five singers of reasonable fame, provided we kept to the budget of two lakh.

‘All set then,’ Bala said as we ended the meeting at six in the evening. I realised I had to leave. After all, I had a big date with the big daddy tonight.

27

‘So, this is almost done?’ I clicked through the slides. Uncle had given me a CD of his work. I had uploaded it on my laptop. The unformatted slides had paragraphs of text, no bullet points and font sizes ranging from eight to seventy-two.

‘Yes, I spent three weeks on it,’ he said.

We sat at a work-table in the living room. Manju studied inside. No one else was at home. Ananya’s father and I hunched close together to see the laptop screen.

‘These have no figures, no charts, no specific points even ...’ I said, trying to be less critical but truthful as well.

‘Figures are here,’ uncle said as he opened his briefcase. ‘I still have to learn that feature in PowerPoint.’

He took out three thick files with dirty brown covers and two hundred sheets each inside.

‘What’s this?’

‘Our last year business data,’ he said.

‘You can’t put it all,’ I said. ‘When is this due?’

‘That rascal Verma wants it in a week,’ uncle said.

The rate at which Ananya’s dad was going, he couldn’t deliver it in a year.

‘One week? This is only past performance data. Don’t you have to make a plan for next year?’

‘I was going to do that, soon.’ He swallowed hard.

I kept my left elbow on the table and my palm on my forehead. I flipped through the slides in reverse to reach the front.

‘What?’ he said. ‘Anything wrong in what I’ve done?’

I turned to him and gave a slight smile. ‘No, a few finishing touches left,’ I said.

‘So, how do we do it?’

'Let's start by you telling me what exactly you do at the bank. And then take me through these files.'

I shut the laptop. For the next three hours I understood what a deputy district manager does at a public sector bank. Actually, there is a lot of work, contrary to my belief that government bank staff did nothing. However, a lot of the work is about reporting, approvals and maintaining certain records. It is more beauraucracy and less business.

I yawned as he finished explaining how the staff-recruiting process works in his Egmore district. I looked at the wall clock. It was nine-thirty.

'Sorry, I didn't even ask you for dinner,' Mr Swaminathan said.

'It's OK, keep going. I'll wash my face,' I said and pulled back my chair.

I came back from the bathroom and uncle had brought two steel plates and a bowl of lemon rice. He put the bowl in the microwave to heat the food. 'Sorry, I can't give you proper dinner tonight. I told the maid to make something simple,' he said.

"It's fine,' I said as I took the plates off him. I went to the kitchen. I picked up the curd and water. I saw the spoons but decided not to take them.

'Manju?' I asked as I returned to the table.

'He ate already. He wakes up at four so he has to sleep now,' uncle said.

We ate in silence. For the first time in their house, I felt welcome. Sure, they'd give me breakfast and a lift to work three days a week. However, today was different. Uncle refilled my plate when I finished and poured water for me. We continued to work after dinner until he couldn't keep his eyes open.

'It's eleven-thirty, I'd better go,' I said. I shut down my laptop and stacked all the papers together.

'Yes,' uncle said as he looked at his watch. 'I didn't realise this would be so much work.'

I came to the door and outlined the agenda.

'Here's the plan,' I said. 'Tomorrow we make a structure, so we at least have a title for all fifty slides that need to be there. The next day we will put the text. Day after we will start on the figures and charts.'

We came out of the house.

'It's late. I will drop you?' uncle said.

'No, there are autos on the main road. Good night uncle, tell Manju I will see him day after.'

'Thank you, Krish,' uncle said as he waved me goodbye.

'Anytime,' I said.

28

I spent the next three evenings in the company of Mr Swaminathan. The Bank of Baroda Egmore district business plan had become the focus of my life. I brought some of uncle's work to my own office and worked on it in the afternoon.

'What are you working on?' Bala said as we met near the common office printer where I had come to collect a printout of uncle's presentation.

'Personal research,' I said as I clenched the sheets in my hand and ran back to my desk.

It is uncanny, but I could tell Ananya's call from the phone ring.

'Hi hottie. How is it going?'

'Did you know Bank of Baroda had no ATMs four years ago, but now there are over a dozen ATMs in Egmore alone,' I said as I opened the twelfth slide of the presentation.

'What?' she said.

'And in two years, there will be thirty,' I said.

'What are you talking about?'

'I am working on your dad's presentation, in my office,' I said and swiveled my chair to turn away from the monitor.

'That's why you are such a sweetie,' she said.

'I am stealing a talented MBA's time paid for by Citibank. I could go to jail for this,' I said.

'How exciting! My lover goes to jail for me,' she chuckled. 'Manju told me you are there every evening until late. And today you took Manju's morning tuitions, too. Take care of yourself.'

'I'm fine. I rest in the office. And the presentation should be done tonight.'

'Cool. How's the bonding with appa?'

'Well, it is pretty business-like. But let's just say, I saw him smile. I bit a whole chilli at dinner and ran to the kitchen. When I returned he smiled for three whole seconds and I created it.'

'With my dada, that's huge,' Ananya said. 'He didn't smile in any of his wedding pictures.'

'Well, he had to marry your mom,' I said.

'Shut up,' Ananya said.

The peon came to me to say Bala had tried my extension and couldn't reach. I told Ananya to hold

'Well, he had to marry your mom,' I said.

'Shut up,' Ananya said.

The peon came to me to say Bala had tried my extension and couldn't reach. I told Ananya to hold.

'Tell him I am with a prospective new client. Inviting them to the concert,' I said. The peon nodded and left.

'Concert?' Ananya said.

'It is a private client event. At Fisherman's Cove,' I said.

'Fisherman's Cove is nice. Can I come?' she said.

'Only if you have ten lakh to spare,' I said.

'Sure, my husband will send the cash,' Ananya said.

'Yeah, right after I execute my bank robbery. OK, now should I humour you or make sure your father doesn't get laughed at in five days?' I said.

'Daddy first,' she said. 'I am back in three days.'

'How is Thanjavur?'

'Temples, Tamilians and a temperamental mother. Care?' she said.

'Maybe next time. What's causing the temperamentalness?'

'Me, me and only me,' Ananya said and laughed, 'as is always the case.'

'Really? What's your crime now?'

'I don't have time for her. Which is true, as I'm all over the district in meetings the entire day. Of course, she also feels saying no to Harish is like declining the Nobel Prize. And so, that's the dinner appetizer. Main course is a lecture on how I've abused my privilege of being allowed to study further. Dessert is usually tears. I have to go to Pondicherry next week. No way I am taking her.'

'You *have* to go?'

'Just a day trip.'

'Hey, isn't Fisherman's Cove on the way to Pondicherry?' I asked.

'Yes, why?'

'Good, I should take the initiative and check out the venue. I'll come with you that day,' I said. Anything to get out of office.

'Oh, cool,' she said.

The peon came again.

'Yes,' I turned to the peon after asking Ananya to hold.

'Sir is asking which client?' peon said.

I looked around. Outside the office window there were several hoardings. I saw one for fireworks.

'Standard Fireworks, Sivakasi. OK?' I said.

The peon nodded.

'Bye sweetie, am I disturbing you?'

'Yeah, but what is life without being disturbed by the right people,' I said.

'Thank you. Love you,' Ananya said.

'I love you, too' I said and hung up the phone. The peon stood in front of me, his eyes big after the last line.

'Why are you still here?' I said.

'Sorry, sir,' the peon said and left.

I left my office early to finish the presentation at uncle's house. We had come to the end with only final formatting left. I passed a CD store in Mylapore. Some music would be nice while I completed the presentation, I thought, I went in.

'What you want, sir?' the shopkeeper said.

I scanned the shelves filled with Tamil CDs in psychedelic covers resembling crime novels. 'What non-Tamil CDs do you have?' I asked.

He shook his head in disappointment. 'Non-Tamil you go to Nungambakkam, sir.' But the shop attendant looked through his collection to find something.

'OK here,' he said as he took out three CDs.

The first CD was non-stop Hindi remixed hits. It had girls with cleavage on the cover. I had to reject it. The second was a romantic love-songs collection that had a heart-shaped cover. The third CD was nursery rhymes in English.

'Give me the love songs,' I said.

The shopkeeper made the bill as I scanned a section on Carnatic music.

'Any good Carnatic music CDs?' I said.

'Good meaning what, sir?' he said as he wrapped my red-coloured CD.

I looked at the Carnatic covers. Most of them had middle-aged Tamilian men and women on them. 'Do you have any greatest hits collection in Carnatic?' I said.

The shopkeeper looked puzzled. I threw up my hands in despair. 'I have no clue. I want to get started,' I said.

'North Indian?' he said.

I nodded.

'Then why you want to learn Carnatic music?'

I didn't answer.

The shopkeeper gave me two CDs. One had a woman holding a tambura on the cover. The other had the picture of an old man. The entire text was in Tamil. I flipped it around.

'T.R. Subramaniam nice,' said an elderly lady who had just walked into the shop and noticed my CDs.

'Yeah, my all-time favourite,' I said as I kept the CDs in my bag and walked out of the shop.

I reached Ananya's place at 6.30. Uncle already sat at the table. He wore reading glasses and made corrections on a printout of the presentation. He had kept hot vadas on the table with red, green and white coloured chutneys.

'Take one. It is a famous shop near my office. I brought them for you,' uncle said.

I looked at him as I picked up a vada. We made eye contact for the first time ever since I had known him. I noticed that if you ignored the wrinkly face and the reading glasses, he had the same eyes as Ananya.

'So today, no matter how late it gets, we finish this,' I said as I opened the file.

Uncle nodded. He pulled his chair close to mine to see the screen.

'OK, so let's go through each slide. I will format as we go along,' I said.

I went through the first five slides in an hour.

'Uncle, do you mind if I put some music on? This formatting is quite tedious,' I said. I opened the CD player in my laptop.

'Play it on the stereo,' uncle said and pointed to the hi-fi system kept in the living room display cabinet. I took out the CDs from my office bag.

Uncle walked up with me to connect the system. He fiddled with the wires as I noticed a one-litre unopened bottle of Chivas Regal whisky kept next to the stereo system.

I took my chances and asked him. 'You like whisky?'

'No, just a little peg sometimes when I have a cold. Harish gave me this big bottle. It will last me years,' he said.

I kept quiet.

'You know Harish? The boy who came to see Ananya.'

I nodded.

‘Really good boy,’ he said.

Uncle switched the stereo on. I gave him the heart shaped CD in my bag.

Uncle turned it around in his hands a few times.

‘That’s all the Mylapore shop had,’ I said in a sheepish voice.

‘What are the others?’

I showed him the other two CDs.

‘T.R. Subramaniam and M. S. Sheela? Who did you get this for?’

‘For myself.’

‘You understand Carnatic music?’

‘No, but I want to learn. I’ve heard it is the purest form of music,’ I said.

Uncle shook his head. I wondered if my reason had not come across as real. He put the CDs back in my bag. ‘Sometimes, I wish I had never encouraged Radha in Carnatic music. It has only given her pain.’

I nodded, not sure of how I should respond. Uncle was talking personal for the first time. It is amazing how much closeness two men with a laptop in a closed room can achieve in five days.

We sat back at the table as I worked on the sixth slide. Mandy Moore’s romantic track filled the room.

I wanna be with you

If only for the night

The lyrics were a little odd for a work date between a fifty-year-old Tamilian and a twenty-four-year-old Punjabi boy, but better than the silence. I enjoyed putting the textboxes, tables, charts and lists in their right place and making each slide look slick. Uncle read each point and checked the figures. The song continued.

To be one who is in your arms

Who holds you tight

The CD played itself over three times before I reached the halfway mark. We paused for dinner at ten. Uncle went to the kitchen and came back with tomato rice in two plates.

‘You must be bored of South Indian food?’ he said.

‘No, I am used to it now. Feels like home food,’ I said.

‘Good,’ he said. He went to the display cabinet.

I had made it to the category of ‘good’ though still not ‘really good’ like Harish, I thought.

‘The presentation is under control now. You want a drink?’ uncle said.

‘Sure,’ I said.

Uncle took out two glasses from the crockery rack in the display cabinet. He told me to get a spoon and ice form the kitchen. He opened the bottle.

‘Five spoons for me is enough,’ he said as he made his drink. ‘How about you?’

‘We don’t use spoon to measure alcohol,’ I said. I was a little agitated. One week of working my ass off and still Harish was the ‘really good’ boy. Fuck you, Harish, I am going to have your Chivas Regal. I poured the golden coloured liquid four fingers thick.

‘What are you doing?’ he exclaimed.

‘Making myself a real drink. Cheers,’ I said and lifted my glass.

‘Actually, Radha stops me from having more,’ uncle said and took the bottle from me. He tilted it and made his drink level with mine.

‘Cheers,’ he said, ‘and thank you. You IITians are very smart. What a presentation you have made.’

‘You are welcome,’ I said.

We finished our dinner and first drink by ten-thirty. I brought the whisky bottle next to the laptop. I poured a second drink for myself and offered it to uncle. He didn’t decline. The song changed to Last Christmas.

Uncle went to the stereo and increased the volume. 'I gave you my heart,' uncle sang in sync with the song and snapped his finger. He came back and sat down.

I had witnessed an amazing sight. A Tamil Brahmin had set himself free probably for the first time. If I didn't have the presentation to make, I'd have loved to observe him more. All I remember is that in the next two hours we reached the last slide and the one-third mark on the whisky bottle.

'And thank you,' I said as I read the last slide. Here we go, it is done.'

I saved the file.

'Save it twice,' uncle said.

I saved it again and checked the time. It was 1 a.m. In three hours, Manju would wake up.

'All ready to present it?' I asked.

'Present? Me? No, no, Verma will present this. My job was to complete this and it's done.'

'Uncle,' I said my voice firmed by the whisky, 'you have to present. What's the point of slaving over this for weeks if you don't get to present.'

'I have never operated that projector,' uncle said.

'There's nothing to it. You IT will set it up. And you press the forward button to move to the next slide.'

'I don't know.' He turned quiet.

I closed my laptop and shook my head. 'This is unbelievable. The presentation is in such good shape. Your country manager will be there. And all you want to do is sit in a corner. Verma will take all the credit.'

'Really?' he said.

'That's what all bosses do, without exception,' I said.

'Bloody North Indian fellow,' uncle said.

I stood up to leave.

'Sleepy?' he asked.

‘Not as much as you. You sleep at ten, right?’ I said.

‘This has woken me up,’ uncle said, pointing me to his drink. ‘Want another one?’

‘Uncle, I have to find an auto. It’s late.’

‘Why don’t you just stay here?’ he said.

‘Excuse me?’ I said.

‘Yes. I’ll give you a set of nightclothes. Mine should fit you,’ he said.

I had past-life trauma of wearing my girlfriend’s father’s clothes. This can’t be a good idea, I thought.

Before I could respond, uncle had poured us another round of drinks.

“Change the music if you want,” he said.

I rifled through Ananya’s tapes in the drawer. I found a Pink Floyd album and couldn’t resist. The alcohol demanded Floyd.

The long, trippy opening note of *Shine On You Crazy Diamond* played in the room.

Uncle tapped a foot gently to the slow beats. I wondered if he would be able to handle so much alcohol. I longed to smoke. *No, don’t think about smoking*, my mind advised. *Don’t think about being with Ananya. Think about the worst-case emergency plan. What if uncle threw up or fainted? How do you call an ambulance in Chennai? How would you explain it to Ananya’s mother?*

However, uncle seemed to be having a good time. He sat on the sofa, and put his legs on the table. ‘One thing Verma told me I will never forget,’ he said.

I nodded.

Verma said, ‘Swaminathan, do you know why they make you deputy GM and sent me to become GM?’

‘Why?’ I said, too drunk to show restraint.

‘He said it was because South Indians are top class number two officers, but horrible in number one positions.’ Uncle shook his head as he took a big sip. Even in his drunkenness, I could see his pain. I didn’t know what to say.

‘Do you agree?’ he asked.

'Oh, I don't know. My boss is South Indian,' I said.

'Yes, but you have just started. Maybe he is right. We hate the limelight. I know I should present this, but I don't want to.'

'Why?'

'Because knowledge is not for showing off. If I do good work, people should notice me. I cannot go sell myself like that shameless Verma.'

I nodded, more to tell him I listened than in agreement. There is no better source of wisdom than two drunk men.

'Right?'

'Depends.' I said.

'On what?'

'Did you feel bad when they didn't make you GM?' I said.

Uncle looked at me for a few seconds. He leaned forward from the sofa to come near me. 'Let me tell you one thing. What is your name?' he said.

Obviously, I was not anywhere close to getting close to him. 'Krish,' I said.

'Of course, sorry, this whisky ... Anyway, Krish, I had offers. Ten years back I had offers from multinational banks. But I stayed loyal to my bank. And I was patient to get my turn to be GM. Now, I have five years to retire and they send this rascal North Indian.'

'You did feel bad,' I said.

'I still feel horrible. I haven't even told this to my wife. I am drinking too much,' he said.

'It's OK. The point is, if you feel horrible then you need to do what it takes to get to be number one. And....' I stopped myself.

'What? Say it,' he said.

'And if you don't have marketing skills, then better admit that than take a moral high ground about knowledge. You've done good work, let the world know. What the hell is cheap or shameless about that?'

Uncle didn't respond.

'I'm sorry,' I said, composing myself.

'No, you are right. I am useless,' he said, his voice quivering. I became worried he'd cry.

'I didn't say that. We made this, right?' I pointed to my laptop.

'You think I should present? Will I be able to?' he asked.

'You will kick ass,' I said.

'What?'

'Sorry, I said you need ice?'

He shook his head.

'You'll be fine. Tell Verma you will present this. Don't give him a copy.'

'I'll fight with him?'

'Yes, if you call it that,' I said. 'And make sure from now on, people know about the work you do. Look at Bala, my boss. He copies the country manager on everything. Bala briefed the country manager about the food menu for this stupid local concert we are having next month. You definitely have to get noticed, you don't have to work. That's how corporates work, everyone knows it.'

Uncle nodded and fell deep in thought. I checked the time: 2 a.m. I couldn't control a yawn.

'OK, we should go to bed,' uncle said and stood up. 'Wait.' He came back with a lungi and a vest. 'Here, will this do?'

You got to be kidding me, I wanted to say, but said, 'Perfect.'

Uncle showed me the guestroom. I sat down on the bed with the nightclothes in my lap.

'What do you want to be? MD at Citibank?' uncle asked me as he reached the door to leave my room.

'A writer,' I said.

'Excuse me,' he said and his tired body became alert again.

'MD, country manager, I don't care, It's not me,' I said.

“Will you leave the bank?”

‘Not immediately. I’ll save for a couple of years first.’

‘And after that? What about your parents? Are they OK with this?’

‘We’ll see. You should sleep, uncle. You have a presentation to make tomorrow,’ I said.

Uncle switched off the main light and left. I went to the bathroom and struggled with my lungi. Finally, I used a belt to tie it around my waist and lay down in bed. My back was resting after eighteen hours; I let out a sigh of relief.

Uncle knocked on my door. He came inside and switched on the light again.

I sat up on the bed in one jerk. ‘What?’

‘Water,’ uncle said as he left a bottle next to my bed. ‘Drink up, or you will have a headache in the office tomorrow.’

‘Thanks,’ I said.

‘You OK with that lungi? You need help?’

‘No, I am fine,’ I said and clutched my belt and modesty close to myself.

‘Good night,’ uncle said as he switched off the light again.

‘Good night, sir,’ I said and cursed myself for the next ten minutes for calling him sir.

29

‘Three lakh!’ Bala flipped during the concert steering committee meeting. Yes, one of the great value additions from Bala is to make everything sound important. He created the CSC, or the Concert Steering Committee. It sounded so important, I could almost put it in my resume.

But right now, we had a problem. Everyone kept silent as the person in charge of the singers gave her report. ‘You want three celebrity singers, sir,’ said Madhavi, a fat agent with spectacles who looked like a cross between a school prefect and an ICU nurse.

‘But how can they get paid so much?’ Bala said. Somehow, Bala felt only he deserved a job that paid far in excess of the work involved.

‘They come with a band, sir, and back-up singers,’ Madhavi said.

Everyone in the room nodded.

Bala shook his head. ‘Why do we need back-up singers? The main ones will crash or something?’

Nobody laughed.

‘Back-up means chorus, sir,’ Madhavi said.

Bala remained unimpressed.

‘Chorus are those people who say aa aa aa in love songs, sir,’ said Renuka, another agent.

‘I know what chorus is,’ Bala said as he banged his fist on the table. ‘But this is too much.’

‘We can cut the food,’ said one agent. He got more dirty looks than an eve-teaser in a bus. He retracted his suggestion.

‘Why don’t we get some lesser known singers?’ I asked.

‘But this is a Citibank event. If we get B-grade singers and tomorrow HSBC does an event with A-grade singers, we are screwed,’ Bala said.

‘Sir, the venue....’ One agent who had never spoken in a meeting in his entire career was shot down in mid-sentence.

'Has to be five-star,' Bala said.

'Who is the top singer of the three?' I said.

'Hariharan,' said one agent.

'No, it is S.P. Balasubramaniam,' said another.

War broke out between the normally peaceful Tamilians. When it came to music, they could kill.

'No match, Hari is no match for SP,' Madhavi shouted emotionally.

'Suchitra? You forgot Suchitra?' another agent said.

Bala stood up. Like all corporate meetings worldwide, even this one had ended without a conclusion. 'All I am saying is, we can't afford to pay this much. The venue, food and advertising are already costing four lakh,' Bala said.

'Advertising?' I asked.

'We are giving a half-page ad in *The Hindu*,' Bala said.

The agents closed their files to leave.

'Isn't it an invitation-only event?' I said.

'Exactly, the ad will say so. Only our customers will have the invites. However, the ad will ensure their friends and relatives feel jealous.'

'That's the Citi advantage,' I said.

'Exactly.' Bala patted my back.

'So, dad's happy, huh?' I quizzed Ananya inside the auto.

'You bet. Dad only talks about the presentation at dinner every day. And now he's in Delhi, to make the same presentation in head office. Can you believe it?' Ananya said.

'Wow!' I said as we reached our destination.

We had come to Ratna Stores in T. Nagar to buy steel plates for my chummery. I needed four, this place had four million of them. Seriously, every wall, roof, corner, shelf and rack over two floors was covered with shiny steel utensils. If direct sunlight fell in the store, you could burn like an ant under a magnifying glass. I wondered how the store kept track of its inventory.

‘How do you ever choose?’ I said to Ananya as we neared the plates section.

Ananya demonstrated the desired width with her hands to one of the attendants.

‘Seriously, thanks for helping dad. I think he likes you now,’ she said.

‘Not as much as he likes Harish. I drank his whisky though.’

‘What?’ Ananya said.

I told Ananya about our drinks session.

‘You wore his what to bed?’ she said, shocked at the end of my story.

‘Lungi,’ I said as I paid at the cashier’s counter. ‘What’s so surprising? It is quite comfortable.’

Ananya raised her eyebrows.

‘I did it for you.’ I looked into her eyes.

She moved forward and even though one could see our reflection in five hundred frying pans around us, she kissed me. All the Tamilian housewives in the store turned to us in shock.

‘Ananya,’ a lady’s voice came from behind us.

Ananya turned around. ‘Fuck, Chitra aunty,’ Ananya said, lifting a large steel tray to hide her face. It was too late as the woman had started to come towards us.

‘Chitra who?’ I said.

‘Chitra aunty lives in my lane. She sings Carnatic music, with my mother,’ Ananya said from behind the tray.

‘I bought Carnatic music CDs, too,’ I said.

‘What?’ she said.

'Never mind, hello aunty,' I said as Chitra aunty came next to us.

'Krish,' Ananya said. 'Colleague.'

'Really, what kind of colleague?' Chitra aunty asked bossily.

'I have to go,' I said and lifted my plates. 'We need these before dinner.'

Ananya called me late at night, after I had eaten in the new steel plates.

'All OK?' I said.

'Sort of,' Ananya said. 'She is going to tell my mother. They have this rivalry anyway. Guruji accepted her but not my mother.'

'And then?'

'Nothing, I'll tell my mother she is exaggerating. Am I mad enough to smooch someone in Ratna Stores?' she said.

'You are,' I laughed.

'Yes, but only you know that.'

'I don't want to ruin what I've built with your dad,' I said.

'It's mom you have to worry about now. Manju and Dad are OK.'

'How?'

'I don't know. I told her you are coming over for dinner tomorrow.'

'Why?'

'The stated reason is to thank you for helping dad. We can tell her about our visit to Ratna Stores before Chitra aunty. Of course, we'll skip a few bits.'

'You shouldn't have kissed me there. Why did you do it?'

'Because I couldn't help it, you are irresistible sometimes,' Ananya said.

My heart stopped for a second at Ananya's response. Alright Mrs Swaminathan, if your daughter can't resist me, there is no way you can either.

‘Excellent presentation, that is what the board told Dad in Delhi. Now they’ve asked all zonal offices to make similar ones,’ Ananya said in an excited voice.

We sat on the floor for dinner. Ananya’s mom kept quiet as she stirred a bowl of rasam. She offered it to me without a word.

‘You OK, mom?’ Ananya said.

‘Did you go to Ratna Stores with him?’ Ananya’s mother said, pointing to me.

‘Oh shit, Chitra aunty had to tell you the next morning,’ Ananya said, her hand busy mixing the rice and daal.

‘Akka, don’t use bad words at the dinner table,’ Manju said.

‘Manju, you eat. I am talking to mom here,’ Ananya said.

‘He’s right. We don’t talk like that in this house. We don’t do the things you do either,’ Ananya’s mother said as she vented some of the anger on the rice in her leaf. She mashed and smashed it with all the vegetables extra hard.

‘What have I done, mom? Krish wanted steel plates. How would he know where to go? I took him to Ratna Stores.’

‘And you do cheap things in the store?’ Ananya’s mother said.

‘What cheap things, mom?’ Manju said.

‘Manju, can you leave the room? Go read your physics book,’ Ananya bade.

‘But I’ve already revised physics today,’ Manju said.

‘Then study maths or chemistry, for God’s sake. Go.’ Ananya’s stern glance did the trick. Manju picked up his banana leaf and took it to his room.

‘Something something cheap something....’ Ananya’s mother said as Ananya interrupted her.

‘Mom, Krish doesn’t understand Tamil. Please, speak in English,’ Ananya said.

Ananya’s mother gathered herself and spoke again. ‘Why are you sending your brother away, when you are ready to be cheap in public?’

'I didn't do anything cheap.'

'Chitra is lying?'

'I gave him a little kiss.'

'Kissing!' Ananya's mother said as if Ananya had mentioned us snorting drugs.

'Mom, stop hyperventilating. He is my boyfriend. You understand?'

'You are my daughter, do you understand? You are spoiling our name in the community, do you understand? I brought you up, educated you, made sacrifices for you, do you understand?'

I don't know if mother and daughter understood anything, but I understood it was time for me to go. I stood up.

'Where are you going?' Ananya demanded of me.

'To wash my hands,' I said, showing her my curd-filled hands as proof.

'Even *my* hands are messy. Stay with me,' Ananya ordered.

'You don't know what I have to bear because of you,' Ananya's mother said. In one movement she stood up, gathered her leaf and composure and left the room.

Ananya let out a huge sigh.

'I liked the rasam, nice and tangy,' I said.

'You said you owe me big time,' I said. I sat in Bala's office. He kept both his elbows on the desk and ran all ten fingers through his oily hair.

'But how can i?' Bala said.

'You said you are over budget. I have a singer for you, free.'

I played with the paperweight in his office. Alone with him, I behaved his equal.

'Who?' he said.

'Radha Swaminathan, upcoming singer.'

'Really? Never heard of her,' Bala said.

'She is still in the underground scene. She has trained in Carnatic music.'

'But this is a popular concert. We'll have dancers to complement the singers.'

'Bala, popular music is cakewalk for Carnatic singers. You know that.'

'Is she good? Have you heard her sing?'

'Sort of.'

'Sort of?'

'Yes, I have. It'll be fine. Plus you have Hariharan and S.P., can't go too wrong.'

Bala stood up and walked towards his window.

'Is she hot?' Bala said, 'Like good-looking?'

'She is my girlfriend's mother. I find the daughter pretty.'

'What?'

'I have to do this Bala. I am hitting all-time low with her. If I don't do something drastic, I can kiss my girl goodbye forever. They've got a Cisco guy lined up, pure as fresh coconut oil.'

'Your girlfriend is Tamilian?'

Yes, Brahmin, so you can deal with it for once.'

'Iyenger or....'

'Iyer, does it matter?'

'No,' Bala said and came back to his seat. 'Now I know why you came to Chennai.'

'Apart from the fact that I was dying to work with a financial wizard like you,' I said.

'What?'

'Nothing, now, are you doing it?'

'What?'

'Finalising the singers, Hariharan, S.P. and the new talent Radha.'

'What will the agents say? We have a committee.'

'Everyone in the committee works for you. They are your drones.'

'But still,' Bala said, in deep thought.

'You decide,' I sighed. 'I have work. I haven't cleaned up my mailbox in ages. I still have those emails of yours asking me to push those Internet stocks, I should delete them, right?'

Bala stared at me as I turned to leave. 'Look, it is not personal,' I said, 'but this is about my future kids.'

‘Aunty, may I come in?’ I said.

Ananya’s mother looked at me through the mesh door with sleepy eyes. She wore a nightie; I had disturbed her afternoon nap.

I had told my agents I would be out for a late lunch. Before coming to their house, I stopped at Grand Sweets and packed two kilos of Mysore pak.

Aunty opened the door. I came inside. She went inside to change her clothes. I flipped through The Hindu until she returned.

‘Uncle’s back?’ I asked.

‘He came last night.’ She yawned. ‘But he is in office now.’

‘Sorry to wake you up,’ I said and passed her the box of sweets.

‘What’s this?’

‘I wanted to apologise for the dinner that night.’

Aunty kept quiet and looked at the coffee table.

‘I am sorry about the Ratna Stores incident. I assure you, nothing cheap happened,’ I said.

‘Chitra is a loudmouth,’ she responded. ‘She would have told the whole of Mylapore by now.’

‘I can understand. We have people like that in Punjabis as well. People who love to interfere in other people’s lives.’

Aunty ignored me. She went inside to keep the sweets in the fridge. She came back with a glass of water and their family dish of hard, brittle spirals that didn’t taste of anything.

I took one. My tooth hurt as I tried to bite it. I took the spiral out of my mouth and faked I had taken a bite by pretending to chew. We had an awkward minute of silence.

‘Aunty, I wanted to show you this,’ I said and opened my bag. I took out the Carnatic music CDs and gave them to her.

'T.S. Subramaniam? Whose is it?

'Mine.'

'What?'

'I'm trying to develop a taste. I'm learning , but it's hard. There's the swara, the raga, the shruti.'

'You know about shruti?'

'Only the basics. I am not an expert like you.'

She returned my CDs and gave a wry smile. 'In Chennai I am a nobody. Even Chitra is better than me. Though people say she knows the corporator of Chennai, who asked Guruji to take her on. The corporator is in charge of the kutcheri venues, so Guruji had to oblige her. Can you imagine how shallow she is?'

'There have to be other gurus,' I said.

'I was ready for an advanced one. Anyway, I am sorry I overreacted that day.'

'No, no, you don't have to apologise. I came to apologise. And for a little request.'

'Request? What are you requesting me? You young people do whatever you want, anyway.'

'No this isn't about Ananya and me. This is about our Citibank concert.'

Over the next half an hour I explained the upcoming event. I told her about the Fisherman's Cove venue, the who's who of Chennai that we expected to be present, the popular music concert for two hours divided between three singers, and that I wanted her to be one of them.

'Me?' she echoed, shocked.

'Yes,' I said.

'I've never sung popular music,' she said.

'You have a trained voice. Switch on MTV and see the latest chartbusters. Three Kollywood, three Bollywood. You are done.'

'Why me?' she asked, still bewildered.

‘Actually, we are desperate. We need three singers and we found only two. My boss gave me the job of finding the third singer. So, my appraisal depends on you.’

‘Who are the other two singers?’

‘They are a bit known. So, the third one has to be fresh to balance things out.’

‘Who?’

‘hariharan and S.P. Balasubramaniam,’ I said.

Aunty’s mouth fell open. She stood up and left the room. I followed her into the kitchen. ‘Aunty, it is no big deal. It isn’t a public concert.’

Aunty answered by placing a frying pan on the stove and pouring oil in it. Once the oil heated up, she tossed in mustard seeds and curry leaves. A pungent smell filled the kitchen. I coughed twice.

‘See, this is what I do all day. I cook, I don’t perform. I am an amateur. I can’t even sit in front of Hariharan and S.P., let alone share the same stage.’

‘It’s fun night, not a competition. They sing after you.’

She tossed chopped onions in the pan. My eyes burned along with my throat. “aunty, have you ever performed on stage before?”

‘No. OK, yes, a couple of times in the Tamil Sangam events where Ananya’s father was posted. But his, five-star hotel, high-society, Hariharan....You’ve got Hariharan, why do you need me?’

‘Only professionals will make it too commercial. We want to give our clients a family feel. A casual vibe will be nice,’ I said.

Aunty shook her head. I continued to convince her until she had prepared the evening dinner of tomato rasam, lemon rice and fried bhindi. I had followed the recipe and could now make rasam from scratch. However, I still didn’t have her on board.

‘Why are you doing this? I accepted your apology, didn’t I?’

‘that’s not why I am doing it.’

‘Then why?’ She covered the dishes with plates.

‘I am doing this because I think you are a good singer.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Because Ananya told me. She also said you’ve trained all your life. And I believe her.’

She looked at me.

‘Don’t tell me the idea doesn’t excite you. Not even a little?’ I said as we came back to the living room.

‘of course, it is a huge honour, but I can’t.’

‘Don’t say you can’t. C’mon, we will keep it a surprise. We won’t tell uncle. We won’t even tell Ananya if you want.

We sat down on the sofa. I noticed the whisky bottle, the level was the same as I had left it.

‘OK, here is the deal. You give a tentative yes now. You prepare the songs when Ananya and uncle are not at home. If on the day of the concert, you want to back out, let me know the night before and I will manage. If not, give it a shot. Deal?’

‘I will chicken out at the end,’ she promised.

‘I’ll take the chance. Please,’ I said.

She took ten seconds, but she gave a brief nod at the end.

I sprang up the sofa in excitement. ‘Cool, your practice starts now,’ I said and picked up the remote and put on MTV.

‘What are these songs?’ she said as the screen showed two hundred South Indian dancers dancing on the Great Wall of China.

‘I’ll let you figure it out. And now, I better go to work,’ I said, ‘The Citi never sleeps, but the Citi shouldn’t bunk office, too.’

I fist-pumped as I left Ananya’s house.

People close to you have the power to disturb you the most. I should have torn my father's letter. I ended up reading it thrice.

Son,

I am omitting the 'Dear' as I am not sure I can address you as that anymore. I knew you are on the wrong path the day you lost respect for your father. I am sure you remember that day. You have broken all contact with me since.

I have learnt you are involved with a girl in Chennai. I don't know the details. I can only deduce so much from your mother's conversations with her useless relatives.

We should choose the girl for you, not you. For you are on the path to becoming a man of low character. Such are the values given to you by your mother and her siblings that you may not even know how disgraceful your actions are.

That you chose to hide your actions from me only reinforces that at some level you are ashamed of them as well.

Unfortunately,

Your father

I changed my sleeping position for the tenth time. I wanted to sleep, but felt more alert than anytime in office. ***Forget it, he only wants to provoke you,*** I said to myself again. ***Go to sleep, now!*** – I scolded myself. The funny thing about sleep is you can't instruct it to happen. Your mind knows the facts and repeats them to you – ***it is late, only five hours when you have to wake up again, you need rest.*** Your mind also has a million options on what it can think about; stars in the clear moonless sky, the beautiful flowers at the Nungambakkam flower shop, the smell of incense in Ananya's house, your best birthday party. There are positive thoughts somewhere in people's heads all the time. But somehow, even one negative thought will crowd them out. Maybe it is an evolutionary mechanism so we can focus on the problem at hand rather than rejoice in all things wonderful. But it makes life a bitch, as good memories have to make space for the next pain

in the neck item. And what does one gain by losing sleep? I hope our genes mutate ASAP so we can evolve out of this.

Memories of that day my father referred to kept coming back. *What drama is he going to do when I tell him about my marriage plans?* I thought. *Go to sleep, idiot, only four hours to wake up,* my mind scolded me.

My brain refused to relax. I sprang out of the bed at two and called home. 'Hello?' my mother said in a sleepy voice.

'Sorry, it is me.'

'Krish? Everything OK?' she sounded panicked.

'Yes,' I said.

'What happened?'

'Dad sent me a letter. I'm quite disturbed.'

'Oh, really? What did it say?'

'Not important. He knows about Ananya.'

'Your friend, no? yes, so what?'

'Mom, she is not just a friend. I want to marry her.'

'Oh Krish, don't start this so late at night. A girlfriend is fine, do whatever you want in Chennai. But why are you forcing her on us?'

'I am not imposing. I am telling you about my choice of life partner,' I said, my voice loud.

'Stop screaming.'

'I'm sorry.'

'If you have the guts, shout at your father.'

'I don't speak to him at all. You know I don't care.'

'Then why is that letter bothering you?'

I kept silent.

'Hello?' my mother said after five seconds.

'I'm here,' I said, my voice soft.

'Are you OK?'

I held back my tears as I spoke. 'I'm lonely, mom. I don't need this from dad.'

'Tear the letter and throw it.'

'I am battling Ananya's parents here anyway. This is such a strange city, I am welcome nowhere. And now you think I am imposing on you,' I said and couldn't control myself. I held the phone tight and cried.

'Stop Krish, don't,' my mother said.

I composed myself and used my left leg to open the fridge. I took out a bottle of water and drank it. 'What do I do?' I said after I regained composure.

'Come back. Why don't you apply for a transfer back to Delhi?'

'I only came here six months ago.'

'Say you have family issues. Tell them I am sick.'

'Mom, please.'

'Leave your job if you have to. We'll find another one. There is a Canara Bank right across our house.'

'Mom, I'm in Citibank. It is an MNC.'

'Fine, we will look for a multinational. Swear on me you will ask for a transfer. Don't be trapped in the city with horrible black people.'

'Mom, they are not all bad.'

'I don't care. Apply for a transfer or I will send a letter to your boss. I will say I am an old woman and you have to consider my plea on humanitarian grounds.'

'Mom, swear on me you will never do anything like that,' I said and smiled at her choice of words inspired by Indian government offices.

'Then you do it.'

'I will, mom. I have to finish a few things first. I am almost there,' I said and regained my composure.

'OK, you fine now?' she said.

'Yes, I am good.'

'Good. And don't take any nonsense from these Madrasis, give it back to them. They get scared fast.'

'OK, mom.'

'And don't get serious about that girl.'

Already too late for that, mom, I thought. 'Good night, mom,' I said.

'I love you. Good night,' she said and hung up.

I came back to my bed and tossed the letter in the bin. I felt light after speaking to my mother and drifted off to sleep in five minutes. What would the world be without mothers?

33

‘Bike?’ Ananya beamed when I went to pick her up on a black Yamaha RX 100.

‘Bala’s,’ I said.

Ananya sat pillion in a maroon salwar kameez, using her white dupatta to cover her head and face. She looked like a member of Veerappan’s gang.

Pondicherry is a hundred and forty kilometres away from Chennai, down the East Coast Road, or ECR, running along the Bay of Bengal. Fisherman’s Cove falls on the way, twenty kilometres outside Chennai city.

We left Ananya’s office at Anna Salai. She sat behind me and held the sidebars tight. By the time we left the city at Lattice Bridge Road, she switched from gripping the sidebars to my shoulders. We took the Old Mahabalipuram Road, which led us to ECR.

‘This is beautiful,’ I said as the sea became visible.

‘I told you.’ Ananya planted a kiss on the back of my neck.

We halted at Fisherman’s Cove where I met the catering manager briefly. Everything seemed under control for the Citibank event. We left the resort and came on the ECR again. An hour of driving later, we passed Mahabalipuram. It had stunning rock-cut temples next to the sea.

‘Wow, these are amazing temples,’ I said as the wind swept back my hair.

The ECR ended an hour after Mahabalipuram. The roads became narrower. We passed several little towns with long names and sprawling paddy fields. At a few places, I had to stop to make way for bullock carts, village school kids and goatherds. We reached Pondicherry around noon, and my first reaction was disappointment.

‘This is it?’ I asked as I reached the main chowk in the town. It was like any other small town in India, dusty and noisy with Cola ad signs painted on uneven walls.

‘The nice part is inside, the French quarter and the Aurobindo Ashram,’ Ananya said as I negotiated a sharp bend in the road along with fifty other two-wheelers and four trucks.

The only French I saw was an underwear billboard with the brand Frenchie.

‘Drop me here,’ Ananya said as we passed Cuddalore road, where HLL has one of its factories.

I had three hours to kill in this Malgudi town as Ananya had an extended lunch meeting. We had agreed to meet at the L’Orient hotel at four for coffee.

I drove out of the factory compound and followed the signs to the Aurobindo Ashram on Rue de la Marine. The Ashram building resembled a quiet hostel by the sea. I came to the reception. More foreigners than Indian thronged the ashram lobby.

A forty-year old Western woman in a sari and beaded necklace sat at the counter. ‘What are you looking for?’ she asked me.

Maybe, because I was in an ashram, or because the way she said it, I suspected deeper meaning in her question. I looked at her. She had blue eyes with wrinkles around them. ‘I’ve come for the first time,’ I confessed.

She gave me Ashram brochure. Another person came and bought meal tickets.

‘Can I get lunch here?’ I asked.

‘Yes, at the Ashram Dining Hall,’ she said and showed me the coupon booklet. I bought one for myself.

‘Come, I’m going there,’ she said, walking out with me from the reception. We walked along a lane adjacent to the ashram. The dining hall was half a kilometre away. She told me her name was Diana and that she came from Finland. A former lawyer, she now found more satisfaction as a volunteer at the ashram than helping Nokia secure patents.

‘Are you a seeker or here as a tourist?’ She handed me my coupon.

‘Seeker?’

‘Yes, if you wish to seek your path. Or if you seek answers to a specific problem.’

‘Frankly, I came with a friend who had some work here. I wanted a day away from office.’

Diana laughed. We reached the dining hall and picked our stainless steel plates. We entered the eating area where everyone sat on the floor. Lunch was simple – organic brown rice, yellow daal and a carrot and peas subzi.

‘OK, so I seek an answer. How do I get it?’

‘Well the answers are within us. People stay in the ashram for a few weeks to introspect, they attend satsang and ask questions of one of the gurus. How much time do you have?’

‘I need to meet my girlfriend for coffee in two hours. Then head back to Chennai.’

Diana smiled and shook her head. ‘That’s a pretty stiff deadline to sort out life’s unresolved answers.’

‘Maybe I shouldn’t even try then,’ I said.

‘Wait, see the gentleman there,’ she said and pointed to a seventy-year-old man in white robes who sat two rows ahead of us. ‘He is a guru. Maybe I can introduce to him.’

‘No, no, please don’t,’ I said.

‘Why not? If he is busy, he will say no.’

‘Pranam Guruji,’ Diana said and touched his feet. I followed suit and he blessed us. ‘Guruji, this is my friend. His name is,’ Diana said and paused.

‘Krish.’

‘Yes, he has only two hours. But he wanted to seek answers to some problems,’ Diana said.

‘What do you have to do in two hours?’ Guruji asked, his voice calm.

‘He has to meet his girlfriend,’ Diana said, excitedly stressing on the last word.

‘And surely, the girlfriend is more important than the problem,’ Guruji smiled.

‘Actually, she is the problem,’ I said.

Diana threw me a puzzled look.

‘Not her. But her family,’ I said. ‘It’s OK. I know it is very little time.’

‘Send him to my house in fifteen minutes,’ Guruji said and left.

34

I hovered at the open door of Guruji's house before walking in.

'Come in, Krish,' Guruji said. He sat on a day-bed in his living room. I had thought I'd be roaming around French cafés in Pondicherry. I had no idea I'd end up in a guru's house. The tiny house had sparse wooden furniture.

'You may find it strange to be here. But I'd like to think we were destined to meet,' Guruji said.

'Do you read minds?' I wanted to know.

'I read people. Your nervousness is obvious. Sit,' he said and stroked his white beard.

I sat cross-legged on the floor, facing him.

'What is bothering you?'

'My girlfriend is Tamilian, I am Punjabi. Our families are against our marriage. I am doing whatever I can, but it is stressful.'

'Hmmm,' Guruji said. 'Close your eyes and speak whatever comes to mind.'

'I love her,' I said, 'and we make each other happy. But if our happiness makes so many people unhappy, is it the right thing to do?'

I rambled for some more time; Guruji didn't make any sound. Since my eyes were closed, I had no idea if he was even around anymore. 'She is my future,' I concluded.

'Is that all?'

'You are there?' I countered.

'Are you sure this is the only problem that is bothering you?'

'What do you mean?'

'There is a lot of ... pain in you, unresolved issues. Before you build a future, you must fix the past.'

'What are you talking about?' I opened my eyes. Guruji's eyes were shut.

‘Close your eyes,’ Guruji said.

‘I have,’ I said and shut them again.

‘What keeps you awake at night?’

I kept quiet.

‘Do you take a long time to go to sleep?’ he probed.

‘Yes,’ I said.

“What kept you awake lately?”

‘Various things. There is work, which I am not exactly excited about. There’s uncertainty about Ananya. There’s my father.’

‘What about your father?’

‘It’s complicated,’ I said.

‘And a heavy load, isn’t it?’

I sighed deeply.

‘Let it go,’ Guruji said.

‘I can’t. I don’t want to. I haven’t even talked about it.’

‘I’m listening,’ Guruji said. He bent forward and placed his palm on my head. I felt a new lightness. I felt transported to another world. It was as if my soul had disowned my body.

‘Guruji, don’t make me do it,’ I begged, not wishing to revisit the pain that awaited me.

‘Go on, I’m listening.’ Guruji said.

Three years ago

My father came home at midnight. I had waited for hours. I didn't have time, I had to talk to him tonight. He refused dinner with a wave of his hand and sat on the living room sofa to take off his shoes.

'Dad?' I said, my voice low, I wore shorts and a white T-shirt. The T-shirt had a tiny hole at the shoulder.

'What?' he turned to me. "Is this what you wear at home?"

'These are my nightclothes,' I said.

'You don't have proper nightclothes?'

I changed the topic. 'Dad, I want to talk about something.'

'What?'

'I like a girl.'

'Obviously, you have time to waste,' he said.

'It's not like that. She is a nice girl. An IIT professor's daughter.'

'Oh, so now we know what you did at IIT.'

'I've graduated. I have a job. I'm preparing for MBA. What's the problem?'

'I don't have a problem. You wanted to talk,' he said, not looking at me.

'The girl's father is taking her abroad. They'll get her engaged to someone else.'

'Oh, so her father doesn't approve of it.'

'No.'

'Why?'

I looked at the floor. 'We had some issues with him, me and my friends.'

'What issues? Disciplinary issues?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Shocking. The son of an army officer has disciplinary issues. All the reputation I have built, you'll destroy it.'

'Those issues are history now.'

'Then why does he have a problem? Does your mother know about this?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Why hasn't she told me? Kavita' my father screamed.

My mother came to the room, woken from a deep sleep. 'What happened?'

'Why was I not informed about this girl earlier?' my father screamed.

'He told me only a few weeks ago,' my mother said.

'And you hid it from me, bitch,' my father said.

'Don't talk to mom like that,' I said in reflex. I would have said more, but I need him today.

My mother broke into tears. This wasn't going well at all.

'Dad, please. I want your cooperation. If you meet her father, he may reconsider.'

'Why should I meet anyone?' he said.

'Because I love her. And I don't want her to go away.'

'You are distracted, not in love.'

'Leave it, Krish, he won't listen. See how he talks to me. You don't know how I lived when you were in hostel.'

My father lunged menacingly towards my mother. He raised a hand to hit her. I pulled my mother behind me. 'Don't,' I said.

'Who do you think you are?' he slapped me hard on my right cheek. I sat down on the dining room chair.

'Leave us and go. Why do you even come back?' My mother folded her hands at him.

'Don't beg, mom,' I said, fighting a lump in my throat. My father had made fun of me earlier for crying. To him, only weak men cried.

“Look at his voice, like a girl’s,’ my father mocked. He gave me a disgusted glance and went to the bathroom to change.

‘Go to sleep, son,’ my mother said.

‘He is sending her away next week,’ I said.

‘What girl have you involved yourself with? You are so young,’ my mother said.

‘I am not marrying her tomorrow.’

‘Is she Punjabi?’ my mother asked.

‘No,’ I said.

‘What?’ she said, shocked as if I’d suggested she wasn’t human.

‘Will you meet her father, once?’

My father came out of the bathroom. He had heard my last sentence, ‘Don’t you dare go anywhere, Kavita,’ my father said, his eyes wild.

I stared back at him.

‘Go to your room,’ my father said.

I came back to my bed. I heard noises in my parent’s room. I couldn’t sleep. I woke up and came towards their room. I’d heard enough arguments of my parents throughout my life to care, but I placed my ear at the door, anyway.

“He is growing up,’ my mother said.

‘With all the wrong values. What does he know about this girl? He is my son, he is from IIT, see what deal I get for him at the right time.’

There it was, for all my father’s principles, I was his trophy to be sold in the market to the highest bidder.

‘You are responsible for bringing him up like this,’ my father screamed at my mother. I heard the sound of a glass being smashed against the wall.

‘What have I done? I didn’t even know about this girl....’

Slap ... slap ... my father interrupted my mother. I banged the door open as I heard a few more slaps. I saw my mother’s hand covering her face. A piece of glass had cut her forearm.

My father turned to me. “Don’t you have any manners? Can’t you knock?”

'You don't teach me manners,' I said.

'Go away,' he said.

I shook my head. I saw the tears on my mother's face. My face burned with rage. She had lived with this for twenty-five years. I did know why – to bring me up; I didn't know how she did it.

My father lifted his hand to hit me. Automatically, I grabbed his wrist tight.

'Oh, now you are going to raise your hand against your own father,' he said.

I twisted his arm.

'Leave him, he won't change,' my mother panted.

I shook my head at her, my eyes staring right into his. I slapped his face once, twice, then I rolled my hand into a fist and punched his face.

My father went into a state of shock, he couldn't fight back. He didn't expect this; all my childhood I'd merely suffered his dominance. Today, it wasn't just about the broken glass. It wasn't only that the girl I loved would be gone. It was a reaction to two decades of abuse. Or that's how I defended it to myself. For how else do you justify hitting your own father? At that moment I couldn't stop. I punched his head until he collapsed on the floor. I couldn't remember the last time I reveled in violence like this. I was a studious child who stayed with his books all his life. Today, I was lucky there wasn't a gun at home.

This insanity passed after five minutes. My father didn't make eye contact with me. He sat on the floor, and massaged the arm I had twisted. He stared at my mother, with a 'see, I told you' expression.

My mother sat on the bed, fighting back her emotions. We looked at each other. We were a family, but pretty screwed up as they come. I took a broom and swept the broken glass into a newspaper sheet. I looked at my father and vowed never to speak to him again. I picked up the newspaper with the glass pieces and left the room.

36

‘That’s it, Guruji,’ I said, tears now dry on my face. ‘I’ve never shared so much with anyone.’

The sound of the sea could be heard, the waves asymmetrical to my tumultuous thoughts.

‘Open your eyes,’ Guruji said.

I lifted my eyelids slowly.

‘Come, we will go to the balcony behind,’ Guruji said.

I followed him to a terrace in the rear of the house. The sea breeze felt cool even in the hot sun. I sat on one of the two stools kept outside. He went inside and came back with two glasses and a book.

‘It’s coconut water. And this is the Gita. You’ve heard about the Gita?’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘sort of.’ I took a sip of the coconut water.

‘What have you heard?’

‘Like it is the ultimate book. It has all of life’s wisdom. You have to work and not worry about the reward. Right?’

‘Have you read it?’

‘Parts of it. It’s nice, but a little....’

‘Boring?’

‘Actually, no, not boring. Hard to follow and apply everything.’

‘I’ll give you just one word to apply in your life.’

‘What?’

‘Forgiveness.’

‘Meaning? You want me to forgive my father? I can’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because what he did was so wrong. He has ruined my mother’s life. He has never loved me.’

‘I am not saying he did the right thing. I am asking you to forgive him.’

‘Why?’

‘For you. Forgiving doesn’t make the person who hurt you feel better, it makes *you* feel better.’

I pondered over his words.

‘Close your eyes again,’ Guruji said. ‘Imagine you have bags on your head. They are bags of anger, pain and loss. How do they feel?’

‘Heavy,’ I sighed.

‘Remove them from your head one by one,’ Guruji said. ‘Imagine you are wearing a thick cloak that is wearing you down. Pardon the hurt others have caused you. What they did is past. What is bothering you today are your current feelings that come from this load. Let it go.’

Strange as Guruji’s metaphors were, I felt compelled to obey the imagery in my mind. My head felt lighter.

‘And surrender to God,’ he went on. ‘You don’t control anything or anyone.’

‘I don’t understand,’ I said.

‘Do you control your life? Your life depends on so many internal organs functioning right. You have no control on them. If your lungs don’t cooperate, if your kidneys fail, if your heart stops, it is all over. You’ll drop dead now. God has chosen to give you the gift of life, surrender to him.’

He kept me in meditation for the next few minutes.

‘And now, you are free to go,’ Guruji smiled.

I opened my eyes. The sharp afternoon sun shone on Guruji’s face. He went inside and brought a small cup with grey ash. He dipped his index finger in the ash and marked my forehead.

‘Thank you’ I said as he blessed me with his hand on my head.

‘You are welcome,’ he said. ‘Anything else I can help you with?’

‘Yes, which way is Hotel L’Orient?’

‘Oh that,’ Guruji laughed, ‘It is on Rue Romain Rolland. One kilometre from here.’

I reached L’Orient at four. Ananya was waiting at the entrance. The hotel is a renovated heritage building and was originally the Education Department Office when the French had colonised Pondicherry. Now a ten-room boutique property, it had a small restaurant in the indoor open patio. We ordered coffee and a slice of ginger cake with custard sauce.

‘Isn’t this place lovely?’ Ananya breathed in deeply.

I nodded, still deep in thought.

‘So, tell me, what did you do? And what’s with the tilak on your forehead?’

‘I hit my father.’

‘What?’

‘A long time ago. Remember, how I would always avoid talking about my father in campus?’

‘Yes, and I never pushed after that,’ she said. ‘But what are you saying?’

I repeated the story of that night.

She looked at me, awestruck

‘Oh dear, I didn’t know your parents were like this.’

‘I never told you. It’s fine.’

‘Are you OK?’ she said and moved her hand forward to hold me.

‘Yes, I am fine. And I met a Guruji, who gave me good advice.’

‘What? Who Guruji, what advice?’ Ananya said.

‘I don’t know the Guruji. It doesn’t matter. Sometimes in your life you just meet someone or hear something that nudges you on the right path. And that becomes the best advice. It could just be a bit of common sense said in a way that resonates with something in you. It’s nothing new, but because it connects with you it holds meaning for you.’

I explained with such intensity, Ananya became concerned.

‘Are you OK, baby? I shouldn’t have left you.’

‘I’m fine. I’m glad I had time. I feel better.’

‘I love you,’ she said, brushing floppy hair off my face.

‘I love you, too,’ I said and clasped her hand tight.

Our order arrived, she cut the cake in two pieces and passed my half to me. I wanted to change the topic. She read my mind.

‘So, tell me about this Citibank event. There is a concert?’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘only for clients though.’

‘Do I get to come?’

‘Of course, I’ll get passes for your family.’

‘Who is performing?’

‘S.P. Balasubramaniam, Hariharan and....’ I paused.

‘Wow, those are big names. Who else?’

‘Some new singer.’

‘Cool, I’m sure mom and dad will love to come.’

I nodded. I spoke after a few more sips of coffee. ‘I’ve tried enough, Ananya. I want to go back.’

I told her about my conversation with my mother about transferring back to Delhi.

‘What do you mean?’ she said, wiping my milk moustache.

‘I can’t work in Chennai forever. I’ll give it a few more weeks, and then I’ll tell your parents to take a call on me.’

‘Weeks? What if they say no?’

‘Then we’ll see. I’ve surrendered everything to God anyway.’

‘What?’

'Nothing, let's go. I want to hit the road while there's still light.' I picked up my helmet.

37

‘Aunty, sorry to bother you, but the concert is next week,’ I said over the phone.

I had called Ananya’s mother from my office in the afternoon. I had the design of the newspaper ad in my hand.

Citibank Priority Banking is pleased to invite its clients

To an enchanting musical evening at Fisherman’s Cove

Featuring maestros:

S.P. Balasubramaniam

Hariharan

And new talent, Radha

The concert will be followed by dinner.

By invitation only.

(For passes, contact your customer rep or any of the branches.)

Note: New account holders who open an account before the concert will also get invites.

I hated the last line as it was too blatant. However, Bala insisted on it.

‘Hello, aunty? You there?’ I said.

‘What have you trapped me in?’ Ananya’s mother wailed.

‘You are practicing, right?’

‘Yes, but....’

‘But what? Have you done any *Kaho Na Pyaar Hai* songs? Those are hot,’ I said.

‘Yes, I have. Film songs are easy. It is ... my confidence.’

‘You’ll be fine. I am sending the ad to the newspaper today. Your name is in it, without surname as you insisted. It will come on Sunday, the day of the concert.’

‘Don’t, don’t put my name. What if I decide not to come?’ she asked with a touch of panic.

‘It’s fine. There are plenty of Radhas in Chennai. Nobody will know which one did not show up,’ I said.

‘I’ll let you down,’ she said.

‘You won’t.’ I said.

‘Until when can you remove my name from the ad?’

‘Saturday. Don’t think like that, please,’ I said.

‘OK, still wanted to check,’ she said.

‘Fine, and practice the *Ek Pal Ka Jeena* song. It is number one on the charts,’ I said.

‘I said take my name out,’ Ananya’s mother called me on Sunday morning at 6 a.m.

‘You saw the ad already?’ I rubbed my eyes. I picked up *The Hindu* from under the chummery entrance door. I opened Metroplus, the Sunday supplement.

‘Yes,’ she whispered. ‘What is this?’

She had called when uncle had gone for a bath. Ananya hadn’t woken up and Manju huddled in his room with his best friends – Physics, Chemistry and Maths.

‘I couldn’t do it,’ I said, and made up a story. ‘The newspaper told me Metroplus goes to press two days before. Only the main paper can be changed until the night before.’

‘So, what are we going to do now?’

She had called me the previous morning to get her name removed. However, I never called the newspaper to change the ad wordings.

‘Nothing, we’ll just say Radha fell ill,’ I said.

She kept silent. ‘Won’t it make you look bad?’ she enquired after a pause.

'Yeah, won't be the first time though. I'll manage. Anyway, all of you will come for the concert, right?' I said.

'OK listen, if I do have to perform, where and when do I have to report?'

My heart started to beat fast. She was going to do it. 'Aunty, everything is well organised. We have a room next to the concert garden that will act as the greenroom. Come there three hours early, by four. OK?'

'Yes,' she said.

'Thanks, aunty,' I said.

'I should thank you. I haven't told anyone at home yet.'

'Good, make an excuse and leave the house. See you.'

38

‘Which one should I wear?’ Ananya’s mother asked, sitting on the king-size bed of the cottage we had converted into a greenroom. The make-up artists, sound engineers and the staff of Hariharan and S.P. had already arrived. The main singers would come only at the last minute. However, Radha had come early and laid out three Kanjeevaram silk saris for me to choose from.

‘They are all beautiful,’ I said.

The first was purple and gold, the second yellow and gold and the third orange and gold.

‘Touch-up, madam?’ the make-up man came towards Ananya’s mother.

‘I should leave the room,’ I said. Even though we had half a dozen people around, I felt awkward watching my potential mother-in-law applying mascara.

‘I’m so tense, I can’t choose,’ she said, wiping sweat off her forehead.

The make-up man applied foundation on Ananya’s mother’s cheeks. I tried not to look.

‘Take the orange, nice and bright.’

‘That’s my wedding sari. I’ve hardly worn it since that day.’

‘Tonight’s quite special, too.’

The make-up man sprayed water on her forehead and wiped it.

‘I’ll be outside. I’ll see you on stage.’

She closed her eyes and folded her hands to pray.

I came outside and checked the food arrangements. I called Ananya at six to make sure they left on time.

‘You are going to kill me,’ Ananya said.

‘Why?’ I said.

‘Mom is not coming.’

‘Why?’ I said, careful to sound upset.

‘She said my grandmother fell ill in Thirukudayur. She left after lunch.’

‘Where is Thirukudayur?’

‘Six hours from Chennai. She won’t be able to make it.’

‘What about you guys?’

‘We are almost ready. I wanted to wear my mom’s nice orange Kanjeevaram sari but I can’t find it. I hope she has not lost it. She wouldn’t take it with her, hardly the occasion.’

‘Leave soon, Ananya, I can’t promise good seats otherwise,’ I said.

‘OK, OK, bye,’ she said and hung up.

Bala arrived at 6:30 with Anil Mathur, the country manager. Anil had flown down from Mumbai. Bala had ensured that a Mercedes brought Anil straight to the venue. Bala tailed him like a Tamil villain’s sidekick, showing him the arrangements and taking credit for the entire event.

‘And this is the bar. And see the Citibank banner behind. I put a big ad in The Hindu today. Number one newspaper here,’ Bala said.

I greeted Bala. He ignored me and continued to walk.

‘Hey, you are the Internet fiasco guy,’ Anil noticed me.

‘Good evening, sir,’ I said. I had become the poster boy for loserdom in the bank.

‘Aren’t you the only Punjabi stuck here?’ he laughed. ‘I think that’s enough punishment. No, Bala?’

Bala guffawed, even though the joke was on him, rather his city.

‘Looking to move back?’ the country manager said.

‘I’ll talk to you about it, sir,’ I said.

‘You let me know first,’ Bala finally acknowledged me. ‘I’ll help him, sir.’

The country manager patted my shoulder and walked away.

Ananya arrived with her father and brother at 7.15. 'Are we late?' she asked breathlessly. She wore a peach chiffon sari with a skinny silver border. She had accessorised with a silver necklace and matching earrings.

'Yes, but the concert hasn't started yet. Come,' I said. I led them to one of the several round tables laid out in the garden. I chose one near the stage.

'Food is that side, and uncle, the bar is that way,' I said.

'I don't drink,' uncle said, looking at Ananya.

'Sure.' I said.

Clients filled each of the ten seats on all eighteen tables. One or two bank agents sat at every table, comprising primarily of junior Chennai Citibankers. Bala and the country manager had a separate table with the biggest clients, those with assets of five crore or more. I felt sorry for these clients. Frankly, I'd rather not be rich than face the agony of having dinner with senior bankers.

The lights dimmed at 7.30. Conversations stopped at the round tables as Bala came on stage. He wore a shiny cream silk shirt under his suit and resembled a pimp in training.

'Welcome everyone, what a delightful evening! I am Bala, regional manager for the Priority Banking Group,' he said and wiped the sweat off his face.

'Your boss?' Ananya whispered to me.

I nodded.

'What's with the shirt?'

'Shsh,' I said. Manju and Ananya's father listened to Bala with full attention.

'I want to welcome someone special,' Bala said.

The crowd cheered as they expected Hariharan or S.P to take the stage.

'Please welcome Mr Anil Mathur, country manager and MD, Citibank India,'

The crowd let out a collective sigh of disappointment.

Anil came on stage and realised that no one cared about him. He attempted a joke. 'Hello everyone, who would have thought some of our biggest clients will come from the land of dosas and idlis?'

The crowd fell so silent, you could hear the waves on the adjacent beach. Ananya looked at me shocked. I shrugged my shoulders. I had no control over this.

Anil realised the joke didn't work and attempted a rescue. 'You see in Bombay, idli and dosa are seen as simple snacks,' Anil said.

'He's digging himself in deeper,' Ananya said.

'Yes, luckily he has only five minutes.'

Anil realised his sense of humour only worked with people who worked under him. He switched to what bankers do best, present boring PowerPoint slides with growing bar charts.

'So you see, when we came to Chennai, we started with a tiny footprint and now we are a giant. From a mini idli we have become a paper dosa,' Anil said, gesturing with his hands to show the relative sizes of the two dishes.

'Please, someone stop him,' Ananya groaned.

'We can't. He is the boss,' I said.

Anil finished his speech and the staff applauded hard. The clients waited in pain as two clueless but confident research analysts spoke about global corporate outlook for the next ten years.

'If we assume a seven percent GDP growth rate, the picture is like this,' the analyst said. Nobody questioned how the seven percent assumption came about, but after that, the analyst had enough charts to show what happens if the growth rate is indeed seven percent.

We ended the presentations at 8.30 People started to get restless as Bala came on stage again. 'Not another banker,' you could almost hear them think.

'And now, for the music concert we have a separate MC, Miss T.S. Smitha,' Bala said.

The crowd applauded as the extra busty Smitha came on the stage. She wore a low-cut blouse, a tad too deep for Citibank sensibilities.

'Welcome, ladies and gentlemen,' Smitha said, holding the mike in her hand. 'Are you having a good time?'

Nobody responded.

‘What is she wearing?’ Ananya said. Our whole table heard and sniggered.

‘It is a little provocative, I admit,’ I said.

‘Her cleavage is so big, she can use it to hold the mike. Hands-free,’ Ananya whispered to me.

‘Shut up, Ananya,’ I said, suppressing a smile.

‘We have three talented singers tonight,’ Smitha said. My heart beat fast. ‘We are all, of course, waiting for the maestros. But the first singer is the new, very talented, Radha. Please welcome her on stage.’

The crowd applauded as I craned my neck to see the stage. Ananya’s mother arrived on stage in the orange sari.

‘It’s mom,’ Manju noticed first as he stood up.

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‘What?’ Ananya’s father stood up as well.

Ananya looked at the stage and then me in quick succession. ‘Krish, what is....’

‘Shsh, pay attention,’ I placed a finger on my lips.

Radha took the mike.

‘Mom!’ Manju screamed.

Ananya’s mother looked towards us and smiled.

‘What are you going to sing for us first, Radha?’ Smitha asked coyly.

‘*Ek pal ka jeena* from *Kaho Na Pyaar Hai*,’ Ananya’s mother answered shyly.

The crowd roared and clapped as introductory music began for the song.

Radha aunty sang well; I noticed several clients tap their feet or nod their heads to the music. Tamilians can tell good singers from bad, like Punjabis can judge butter chicken in a jiffy. Nobody in the audience looked disapproving.

‘How did Radha come here?’ Ananya’s father spoke after recovering from the shock.

‘Obviously, Krish arranged it, dad. Can’t you guess?’ Ananya said.

‘She never told me,’ uncle said. But his eyes glinted with pride.

‘Mom is singing so well,’ Ananya said to Manju, who nodded and reached out for the various snacks ferried by waiters.

Ananya bent forward and kissed me on my cheek. Her father didn’t notice, as his eyes were transfixed on stage. A few agents did, and I smiled in embarrassment.

‘Ananya, this is an office event,’ I whispered.

‘Of course, that’s why my mother is on stage,’ she said as she played footsie with me.

Her mother switched to the latest Tamil hit number from Rajni's movie. The crowd's excitement rose further. The song was a slow ballad, and required a lot of voice modulation. Claps ran through the crowd as Ananya's mother maneuvered a tough range of notes.

'Lovely, beautiful!' Ananya's father said in reflex as Ananya's mother switched three octaves in one line.

Ananya's mother sang four more songs to finish her act. Each song ended with enthusiastic applause.

Smitha came on stage again.

'That was wonderful, Radha. And before you leave, I'd like to invite the next singer, Mr S.P. Balasubramaniam, who has a few words to say about you.'

The crowd rose to its feet and applauded as one of South India's greatest singers took the stage. Radha aunty folded her hands and bowed to him.

S.P. said, 'Good evening, Chennai, and thank you, Citibank. Before I begin, I want to praise Radha for her wonderful singing. The songs were popular, but I can see she has a strong classical base. Do you sing often, Radha?'

'No, first time like this.'

'Well, you should sing more. Shouldn't she, Chennai?'

Everyone banged their tables in support. Ananya's mother bowed to everyone. As she straightened, her eyes were filled with tears.

'So, you will?' S.P. said as he pointed the mike to Radha.

'Yes, I will. Also, sir, I want to say that today is the happiest day of my life. I've shared the stage with you.'

The crowd clapped. Radha aunty fought back tears as she left the dais.

'And I thought her happiest day was the day I was born,' Ananya muttered as she continued to clap.

The evening progressed with S.P. and Hariharan casting their spell on the crowd. For everyone else, the main act had just begun. For me and Ananya's family, the main act was over.

Ananya's mother joined us at the table after ten minutes.

'You were wonderful,' a lady at the next table said to Ananya's mother.

Ananya's father exchanged shy glances with his wife. S.P. sang *Tere mere beech mein* from *Ek Duj Ke Liye*. I looked at Ananya. Our struggle resembled that film's story. I only hoped our end wouldn't resemble that movie's climax.

An hour into the concert, Bala came to my table.

'Krish, come with me. I want you to meet Mr Muruguppa, famous jeweler,' Bala said.

'What?' I said.

'Come, he wants to open a ten-crore account. Give him some bull on Citi. I have to drop Anil at the airport.'

'Sir, I have guests,' I said as Ananya noticed my dilemma.

'It's fine, we will manage. Dinner's over there, right?' Ananya said.

'Oh, so she is the one?' Bala said and turned to Ananya. 'Tamil teria?'

'Let's go, Bala,' I said.

I met Mr Muruguppa, a fat, jovial, fifty-year-old.

'Punjabi? Tamil ille?' he said and gave me his card.

'No. So you are the jewellery king?'

'What king? Emperor! We are the biggest in Chennai.'

'Sir regarding your account,' I said as I noticed Ananya's family from a distance. They laughed together over dinner. Several people came up to congratulate Ananya's mother. The time to strike was not far away.

'Mr Muruguppa, actually, I may need some jewellery myself,' I said as I led him to the dinner table.

40

‘Oh, trust me, she is on a different planet since that day. No need for dinner to thank her,’ Ananya said over the phone.

We were in our respective offices. I had just invited Ananya’s family for dinner.

‘But we didn’t even pay her for the concert. That’s the least I can do,’ I said.

‘You have done a lot,’ Ananya said.

‘Trust me, the dinner is important,’ I said.

‘Really? What’s up?’

‘You’ll find out next Friday at Raintree. See you all at eight,’ I said.

The Raintree restaurant is located in the Taj Connemara hotel, on Binny Road off Anna Salai. The outdoor restaurant is snug under a canopy of trees of the same name. Fairy lights adorn the branches of the trees and candles light up the tables. Apart from Amethyst, it is one other oasis in the city.

I sat with Ananya’s family at one of the outdoor tables, my trouser pockets heavy.

‘This is stunning,’ Ananya said as she looked up at the little lights. She wore a white fitted dress with sequins that reflected in the semi-darkness.

‘You’ve never come here before?’ I said.

‘No we haven’t. Right, dad?’

Uncle shook his head even as he admired the foliage right above us. Uniformed waiters served us a welcome drink of coconut water with fresh mint. They left the menu cards on our tables. The restaurant specialises in Chettinad food, named after a region south of Tamil Nadu. The cuisine is known for its intense spices and flavours, along with a large range of non-vegetarian preparations.

'Sir, for cocktails, I'd recommend Kothamalli Mary,' the waiter said.

'Kotha-what?' I asked.

'It is like a Bloody Mary, sir, tomato juice and vodka, but with Chettinad spices.'

I looked at uncle. He looked reluctant to nod for alcohol in front of his wife.

'I want one,' Ananya said.

Ananya's mother gave her a sharp look.

'C'mon, just one cocktail,' Ananya said.

I opened the menu. I couldn't pronounce the tongue-twister names of the dishes. Specials included kuruvapillai year and kozhi melagu Chettinad. I didn't bother reading the rest.

'You know this food better, please order,' I said.

Ananya's parents looked at the menu several times.

'It's too expensive,' Ananya's mother said.

'It's fine,' I said. 'Ananya, please.'

Ananya took the menu and ordered for everyone. We ordered kozhakattai, masala paniyaram, adikoozh, kandharappam, seeyam and athirasam. Of course, I had no clue what went into those dishes; I figured at least one of them would be edible. The waiter also suggested we order idiyappam, rice noodles bunched up like a bird's nest.

'How is the IIT preparation, Manju?' I asked after the waiter left.

'Good, I came tenth in the Mylapore mock IIT test,' Manju said.

I nodded. 'So, any more singing offers?' I said to aunty.

Aunty smiled. 'Don't embarrass me. But I did find another Guruji who has a modern approach to Carnatic music.'

I turned to Ananya's dad. 'How's the bank, uncle?'

'Good, your presentation is still being talked about.'

The food arrived; spicy, tangy and delicious.

‘This is great,’ I said as I had the masala paniyaram, a tastier cousin of the idli and shaped like a ball.

The Raintree staff brought a trolley with ten chutneys to choose from.

‘I swear, Delhi needs to taste this. We haven’t gone past the paneer masala dosa yet,’ I said as I took a spoonful of the tomato tamarind curry with idiyappams.

‘You like it? I can make it at home,’ Ananya’s mother said.

I realised that the right moment was near. Maybe at dessert, I told myself. We scanned the dessert menu. Ananya’s father chose a coconut ice-cream. The deep love for this fruit among South Indians is inexplicable. The ice-cream arrived in an actual green coconut shell.

‘Superb,’ Ananya’s father said, a signal I took as *ready get-set, go*.

‘I want to talk about something important,’ I said.

Ananya’s father looked up from his ice-cream.

‘If it is OK?’ I amended.

Uncle nodded. Ananya’s mother looked at Ananya and me.

‘Manju, you too,’ I said. He kept his face so close to the ice-cream bowl, his spectacles were smeared.

I had everyone’s attention. ‘Hi,’ I cleared my throat. ‘Uncle, aunty, Manju, I came here six months ago. It is no secret why I chose Chennai as my first posting. However, I cannot stay here forever. I met Ananya almost three years ago, and apart from our first fight, I’ve loved her every day since that day.’

Ananya took my hand in hers from under the table.

‘And we thought our love is enough reason for us to get married. We thought our parents will meet at the convocation and things will be smooth. Well, we were wrong.’

The waiter came to collect the ice-cream plates. I told him to come five minutes later.

‘We could have run away. We could have forced our decision on you. However, Ananya told me she had this dream of both sets of parents smiling on our

wedding day. And so, I want to see if we can do that. Also, I didn't think we had done anything wrong that we had to run away.'

Ananya's parents kept a deadly silence. Either they were listening carefully or the ice-cream had been too cold.

'And ever since I came to Chennai, I have tried to be accepted by you. I don't expect you to love me like you do Harish, but at least you can accept me.'

Ananya's mother wanted to talk. I signaled her to wait. 'And while you may not love me, I don't want you to merely tolerate me either. Somewhere in the middle lies the acceptance I am talking about.' I slid my right hand inside my trouser pocket and collected the four mini boxes with my fingers.

'Keeping all that in mind, considering your daughter's happiness and taking a view of what you know of me,' I said and paused to breathe. I took out the four little red boxes and kept them on the table. The boxes said "Muruguppa Jewellers" on top. I opened the four boxes. Each had a gold ring. I stood up from my chair and knelt on the floor.

'I, Krish Malhotra, would like to propose to all of you. Will all of you marry me?' I said and held the four boxes in my palm.

Ananya's parents looked at her and me in quick succession. Manju's mouth was open, the coconut ice-cream very visible inside.

Ananya's father gestured to Ananya on what to do.

'After you, mom and dad,' Ananya said, 'and Manju, you too.'

Manju picked up his box. 'Nice, real gold?' he asked.

I nodded.

'Argentum, atomic number seventy-nine,' Manju said as he held the ring in his hand.

'Uncle?' I prompted. My knees had started to hurt on the concrete floor.

'if you promise to take care of my daughter,' Ananya's father said, 'then it is a yes from me.' He bent forward and picked up his box.

Ananya hugged her father. 'Thanks, dad,' she said, 'I love you.'

Ananya's father blessed her with a hand on her head.

Ananya's mother said, 'It is not that we don't like you. But our communities....'

Mom, c'mon,' Ananya interrupted her.

Ananya's mother took a minute to respond. 'I know he will take care of you. But will Krish's parents treat my daughter with respect?'

'We'll work on that, too,' I said, aware another challenge awaited me in Delhi. "If they do, then?'

'Then it is a yes form me,' Ananya's mother said.

'Yay!' Ananya cheered. Auntly took her ring and Ananya planted a kiss on her mother's forehead.

'Akka, you haven't picked yours,' Manju said as the mother-daughter affection continued. When they separated, both had tears in their eyes.

'Oh, of course, where is it?' Ananya picked up her ring.

I came back to my seat.

'Sir, did you enjoy your meal?' the waiter said as he cleared the plates.

'You bet I did,' I said, tipping him more than the bill that night.

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'I will miss you,' Bala said as he handed me my transfer papers in his office.

'I wish I could say the same,' I said. Bala's chin dropped. 'I am kidding, cheer up. I won't be there to blackmail you anymore,' I said.

Bala had agreed to make my case with Anil Mathur for the same reason. My transfer to Delhi took two months to execute. I wanted to be home soon. After all, I had finished my Chennai job. Of course, we had a few more battles to win. Ananya would have to deal with the full force of Punjabiness. However, life is best dealt with one disaster at a time.

Operation Delhi would have to be quick. Ananya convinced her bosses to send her to Delhi for a week. After all, every HLL manager must have North India exposure, Ananya had argued.

Ananya's parents came to drop us at the airport. Ananya's mother worried about Delhi, given its status as the worldwide capital of eve-teasing.

'Mom, the HLL guest-house is safe. I won't be out much,' Ananya said.

Ananya's dad had his own concerns. 'Remember, we have said yes. But you are not married yet. Don't embarrass us,' uncle said to me as he bid us goodbye.

'Of course, uncle,' I said, trying to figure out what he meant. No sex, I guess.

Ananya and I went inside the terminal. She grabbed my arm as her parents melted out of sight. The flight took off. I brought out my notebook to explain the next stage to Ananya – Operation Delhi.

'So, I have to agree with your mom, whatever she says. Like whatever,' Ananya said, twenty minutes into the flight and thirty thousand feet high in the sky.

The plane passed through an area of turbulence.

'Yes, never disagree,' I said, tightening my seat-belt, 'and the timing of your trip could not be better. My cousin sister Minti is getting married next week. You'll come to the wedding, meet everyone, bingo, done.'

Ananya lifted the armrest to hold my arm tight. 'I'm sure I'll be fine with you.'

'See, you have to win over my mother. My father won't agree ever, so he is not part of the equation. Make mom happy, OK?'

'Lower the armrest, it is not safe,' the flight attendant said in a strict voice as she passed the aisle.

When you are part of a couple, you don't realise how cheesy your affections are to the outside world.

'Who does she think she is?' Ananya huffed.

'My mother?'

'No, the airhostess. What's with the thick red lipstick? Is she a flight attendant or an item girl?'

I don't know why women love commenting on other women's appearances. I never noticed the bald man next to me, who snores through the flight.

'Focus, Ananya. You are dealing with a Punjabi mother-in-law here. You have never seen anything like this,' I said.

'Can't wait,' Ananya said, sarcasm dripping from her mouth like the airhostess's lipstick.