

GAURISH NINNEKAR

A MERE NIGHTMARE

Another peg

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First edition

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To my mum and dad, for always being my guardian angels.

And

To my late brother, Vishal Kulkarni.

Thank you for reminding me, that everything I have, is worth it.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgement</i>	v
1 Aarush	1
2 Ritika	6
3 Aarush	11
4 Vikrant	17
5 Ritika	21
6 Ritika	25
7 Vikrant	31
8 Aarush	38
9 Ritika	45
10 Aarush	48
11 Ritika	51
12 Aarush	57
13 Vikrant	66
14 Aarush	69
15 Ritika	76
16 Aarush	86
17 Vikrant	91
18 Aarush	98
19 Ritika	102
20 Aarush	111
21 Vikrant	116
22 Ritika	120
23 Aarush	126

24	Vikrant	135
25	Ritika	138
26	Vikrant	143
27	Ritika	147
28	Ritika	152
29	Vikrant	159
30	Vikrant	162
31	Ritika	168
32	Aarush	173
33	Vikrant	178
34	Ritika	181
35	Aarush	185
36	Aarush	192
37	Vikrant	195
38	Ritika	200
39	Aarush	206
40	Ritika	212
41	Aarush	217
42	Aarush	221
43	Vikrant	226
44	Aarush	232
45	Ritika	238
46	Vikrant	244
47	Aarush	249
48	Vikrant	255
49	Aarush	258
50	Vikrant	264
51	Ritika	268
52	Aarush	272
53	Vikrant	275
54	Ritika	280

55	Aarush	283
56	Ritika	287
57	Aarush	290
58	Ritika	294
59	Aarush	297
60	Aarush	304
61	Ritika	310
62	Aarush	313
63	Ritika	317
64	Aarush	321
65	Vikrant	325
66	Aarush	328
67	Ritika	332
68	Aarush	335
69	Vikrant	339
70	Aarush	345
71	Vikrant	348
72	Aarush	354
73	Aarush	363
74	Vikrant	370
75	Ritika	373
76	Aarush	376
77	Ritika	382
78	Ritika	389
79	Vikrant	395
80	Ritika	399
81	Ritika	403
82	Aarush	406
83	Ritika	410
84	Aarush	413
85	Ritika	417

86	Aarush	421
87	Vikrant	425
88	Vikrant	429
89	Aarush	433
90	Vikrant	436
91	Aarush	439
92	Vikrant	445
93	Aarush	449
94	Ritika	455
95	Aarush	460
96	Aarush	466
	<i>Down the road</i>	471

Acknowledgement



Firstly, I blame you, my friend and brother by heart, Vishal Kulkarni for making me go through this horrible and exhausting experience of writing a book. I never knew that I would actually be able to complete something which I started, and which took so much out of me. But, after more than 500 pages, 772 dull days and 773 empty nights, I see myself more than I was before.

I may have lost you, but you would always be with me, in this epic series of *A mere nightmare*. For, your death and the heartbreaks and chaos which came with age is the true inspiration behind this book.

Secondly, I would thank my family, for supporting me in every moment of my life.

Without you, I could never be able to achieve anything I have and will be having, in my life. I wanna thank my people and every other person who came into my life. For, you inspired me and motivated me, to stick to this awful journey.

One

Aarush



It's somewhere in the evening, and as one of those many vague moments, where the glass of whiskey is the companion for the night.

The club is not hurried to fill its floor but filled.

Well, I'm not new to this place.

Since my college days, I've been to this club.

In these many years, this place hasn't changed much, except for people who come here.

All the new faces.

People got ahead of me. I don't know where I'm going, but it seems I'm already stuck here making decent opportunities and getting a wonderful life, so where are they going?

'Raghav, make another one,' I speak.

He responds, 'Regular??'

'Make it strong,' I respond.

'Certainly,' he pours the drink and adds, 'You seem a little

A MERE NIGHTMARE

different today. Is something bothering you?’

I answer, ‘Nothing new,’ while I soften my lips with whisky.

‘As far as I know, you order strong only when you are upset about something. What makes you order it today?’ Raghav speaks calmly but curious enough to make me answer his question.

Putting the glass down, I speak, ‘That explains everything. It is really easy, really. Everything in life has become routine. Be it fast or sluggish, feed, work, sleep, or idle, the cycle goes on.’

He barely nods.

I take a sip and add, ‘It’s like, I’m living on borrowed time.’

‘Well, it’s normal, bro. You are getting worried over nothing. It’s just, If you have no one to share your time with, you might not feel rested,’ he speaks.

‘Don’t you have anybody to spend your time with?’ he asks.

‘Nope! And I am not fond of getting either,’ I answer.

He throws me a smile, and answers, ‘Trust me, you seriously need someone. For as long as you wallow in self-pity, you won’t live up. Because life becomes, a bit adventurous when you spend it with someone; who’s going to hold your hand in all the ups and downs. They may even heal the lesions of the bad hair days. And of course, help you out to burn some calories,’ he speaks, raising his brows and throwing a naughty smile.

I smirk and take a sip from my drink.

A stunning woman appears from out of nowhere, and asks, ‘Excuse me, do you have a moment to chat?’

Big bright eyes, with those eyeliners giving her a sharp look, seem to be the night’s killer.

'I am Ritika. Please listen carefully,' she steals my attention.

'I am here at my friend's bachelorette party, and these people have dared me to take a sip from your drink and kiss you. I know it's quite awkward, but please allow me, if you don't mind,' she speaks in an anxious voice, enough to make her prettier than she is already.

Raghav stares to the roof and exclaims, 'Oh great, now you heard my words,' and walks away.

'Well! Okay. Here,' I speak calmly.

She grabs the glass and takes a sip and kisses me on the cheeks.

'Thank you,' she speaks and turns back to her friends with a grin as a sign of victory and moves back to them.

Even, anyhow, long before I was aware of that girl, they were no longer there.

I then stick to the bar to find something more to drink.

Later, as I get out of the place, I pull up in my car.

When I get closer to the driveway, I notice that they're waiting for a cab.

It's almost midnight now, so I consider offering to help her, but before I could reach them, I see a bike reaching them.

It stops, and one girl gets on it and leaves her alone.

She gets into her phone, looking here and there timidly.

Before I could think of anything else, Few drunken guys walk out of the club dancing and laughing.

She averts her eyes and attempts to avoid meeting their gaze.

They leered at her from a distance, began whistling and pointing, and started mocking her.

She notices my existence from a distance, but I can't tell if she really knows me.

A MERE NIGHTMARE

I drag my car towards her.

It just takes her a few seconds to get into my car and she gets in and locks the door.

'I know I have already troubled you. But my car is not starting, so please drop me up to the corner, and I'll hail a cab there,' she speaks.

'Chill! Don't worry, I'll drop you at your home. And It is okay, after all, it is not safe for you to stand alone and wait for the cab, in this middle of the night; where people like these are roaming out to prey someone like you,' I speak.

'What do you mean by like me? See this is the problem of people like you. You guys think that girls can't protect themselves from the danger and need you people. No thanks, just drop me to the corner. I'll book a cab and go,' she replies angrily.

Whenever they get a chance, I know that girls like to wave the feminist flag, but the lady was crazy about everything. A few minutes back, I met her in the club, and now she is in my car and teaching me something about safety while those men are still back there watching us in the car.

'First of all, its late night and don't take my words otherwise.

You came to me. Another, it was you who jumped in my car and now without excuse scolding me.

Anyways, how ironic it is that you have not even asked my name yet,' I reply in defending tone.

'Disgusting!' I am sorry. I didn't mean to be rude, but the way you said it pissed me,' she speaks.

'Anyways what is your name?' she asks, throwing me a smile.

'Leave what's the point of telling you now.'

‘Oh, come on, don’t be so mean, say it,’ she replies.

‘It’s doesn’t matter,’ I speak, while her phone rings.

So we left the parking area of the club and drove, enjoying the empty road and warm air of the heater.

We remained silent for the whole time, and even she is on her phone, texting someone.

I guess it’s her mum or roommate who seems to be worried about her getting home.

After travelling for some time, we reach a corner of some godforsaken place.

‘Wait, stop, I’ll walk from here,’ she says.

I pull the car aside.

‘Here?’ I ask.

‘Yeah, I’ll walk from here.’

‘But, it’s an empty dark road. How am I suppose to leave you here?’ I speak.

‘Nah, it’s okay. My home is just a few steps from here, don’t worry, I’ll go,’ she replies.

She gets out of the car and speaks, ‘Thank you.’

‘It’s okay. Goodnight,’ I reply and push the pedal softly.

Walking some distance, she asks, ‘Hey! you didn’t tell me your name?’

‘Aarush,’ I reply and drive away.

* * *

Two

Ritika



Ana, my God is going to kill me.

It's now it's quarter to eight at midnight, and I was expected to be home by 10 p.m.

I slowly open the door, attempting to enter without making any noise.

I see her sitting on the couch, holding a book, and her hot chocolate on the table as I walk down the corridor.

It's no surprise she's up in the middle of the night with that.

I begin walking down the hall behind her back, slowly pushing my feet against the floor.

'That won't keep you from me,' she speaks.

Damn, How the hell, she gets to know every time.

She turns back and speaks, 'Come here and sit.'

I move and take a seat beside her.'

She gives me an angry motherly look.

In this life, the only thing I fear the most is my elder sister, Ana, and her lecture.

Before I could give my testimony, she speaks, 'What time is it Ritu? I told you to come back home before ten.'

I look up in her eyes and answer, 'Di, I don't know when I lost track of time.'

She replies, 'These days you have been so irresponsible. Where were you anyway?'

'At friend's party,' I reply.

'But at least you should have informed me, right. I was worried about you,' Ana replies.

'I Forgot, I'm sorry. But it is okay, Di, come on, I am late by one hour, and please stop bothering so much I am not a kid anymore,' I speak.

'What do you mean by bothering. In case you have forgotten worrying for you is one of the many responsibilities I have...' Ana raises her voice.

'Okay, I understand. It means that Di, but you're also making my life miserable. There's no need to fret about me,' I respond.

'Let you go out into the middle of the night, to play with the freedom of not being afraid. Is that what you're interested in?' she asks me sharply.

'Di, I'm used to, I don't need your protection,' I retort, upset.

'That's it? That's all you need? me off your life?' she utters dramatically.

'Di, I am not a kid anymore. So please, for God's sake, for once in your life, just leave me alone.

You are killing me,' I bawl in a rage.

Moments later, everything around me has stood still and

A MERE NIGHTMARE

quieted down.

I have no idea what I was talking about when I just said that.

I left her utterly confounded before she could utter a single word.

I lay in total darkness on my bed in the small pool of light provided by the dim window.

The wall, which seems to be my theatre, holds the memories of me and my sister's childhood.

She's done everything she can to discourage me from being subjected to the dreck.

But, by now, she must understand that I am a fully grown woman.

There is nothing in this world that I can't do on my own. I know perfectly well.

There's nothing at all that she could do to make things better for me; she had a difficult job in hand raising a child like herself, without any assistance.

There occurs a knock on the door, 'It's open,' I answer.

The grin broadens on Ana's face as she walks in through the brightly lit hallway.

I refrain from commenting, for fear of saying anything inappropriate.

To spill any word, now, means misery and I would want it to stop.

When she draws close, she remains quiet and sits down.

Looking at our pictures on the wall, she says, 'You remember the days when we spent our vacations at our old farmhouse, with Grandma?'

I give a gentle utterance.

'On evenings when we used to go to the park, you used to

be so excited about it. But one day you vanished.

Everyone was terribly afraid, and was scouring the whole place for you,' Ana speaks.

'And I was discovered, weeping by the banks of the lake,' I grin a little.

'Afterwards, I kissed you and wept. She made me promise that I'd take care of you when you were growing up. That day, I almost lost you, and I still have your memory trapped in my chest. I trust you are an adult and can look after yourself now. But as a sister, I am still worried about you,' her eyes welled with tears.

I clutch her to my chest and claim, 'I know you're trying to take care of me, but it won't be forever. I have to face uncertain things on my own. And To me, it is enough to know that there are a few constants in life that I can look, listen, and learn without trying to change anything else.'

And then she sheds tears as she says with obvious remorse, 'Of course, but I think about you all the time.'

'Di, I am not the only 21 years old in this city,' I utter comically.

She gives a gentle utterance.

And so, two sisters sat in a room, holding each other.

You know, your own sister is the only one who can take the place of your beloved mother. And none will ever love you apart from her and treat you in the way she does. But to get one is the Almighty's blessing.

'Now please don't cry,' I speak.

'Hmm... Ritu, I want to speak to you on something,' she speaks.

'Yeah, I am listening,' I answer.

'Ritu, it's time for you now to enter the professional life.

A MERE NIGHTMARE

We are planning to expand our business in London, and for such, we need someone who can handle everything smoothly and work efficiently. So I want you to be there, looking after the things,' she speaks.

Trust me, I'm not a suitable person for it, for I still lack the seriousness towards the responsibilities.

Yet, I understand I should help Ana now. It is time that we share our burdens.

And so, I replied, 'Okay! I'll do it,' and asked her about the moving date.

'Four months from now. Till then, Laura will train you for the job,' she replies.

'But I'll join by Wednesday. Because I am busy this weekend,' I reply.

'But make sure you come on Wednesday morning, on time, deal?' she Speaks.

'Yeah sure,' I reply with a warm hug.

'Okay then, Goodnight,' she speaks and leaves the room.

* * *

Three

Aarush



There is a black Mercedes in the middle of the driveway.

Rolling in the lane and rising out of the smoke.

I reach the office and get out of it, while everyone welcomes me with Garlands.

I am greeted warmly by the boss's assistant, Sherlyn, who is wearing a silk dress.

I see her draw near to my own, bringing her face closer to mine and brush her lips over mine.

While she pushes me into my boss's cabin, he welcomes me by emptying his chair and makes me sit on it.

As I'm loving this beautiful as the moment itself, my phone rings.

Everyone looks at me like I just pulled out a pistol.

All seems to be in total silence as everyone is looking at me.

At that moment, I am rudely awakened by an annoying

A MERE NIGHTMARE

sound, I wake up to reality.

It's already 7:30 am, and I've lost track of time.

'Wait. What??? 7.30?' I got a meeting at 8.

I jump out of the bed and rush to the bathroom.

Later, attiring myself as quickly as I could, I grab a piece of bread and rush downstairs.

By the way, meet this Little fellow, Ashu.

He is the son of Mr and Mrs Nair, living in 402.

Trust me, this seven-year-old is my inspiration to work in such a messy system with great dedication and efficiency.

Because when Ashu plays with his ball, no matter what, he just enjoys what he is doing without paying attention to his surroundings.

I pass him by and wave at him.

'Hello, Aarush,' he replies with his sweet voice.

'Up for the school?' I ask.

'Yeah. Where is my chocolate, Aarush?' he responds softly.

I forgot to get one for him. It's a deal we made long back, that he'll be rewarded with chocolate every time we meet if he goes to school regularly and doesn't do naughty things.

Ever since I have shifted to this apartment, Mr Nair and I have been very close friends.

We spend time talking about ourselves and sometimes, along with some drinks and watching football.

They are gentle people.

'I will get you one, in the evening.'

'Okay,' he replies.

Trust me; this kid is the stress reliever of my life. I grab him in my arms and give him a warm hug.

'Okay, Ashu, I have to go now, bye,' I say and drift away.

There is an intense bustle in the office on a Thursday

morning. As everyone is concentrating on their jobs.

I was late by one hour, so the meeting must have already begun.

The people at my table are talking about the 'Employee of the Month' awardee today.

The same cliché can't be applied to me: I start my day with my ass glued to this chair, and I continue it till the clock ticks five.

"Do you know that board is planning to give Mayank as the employee of the month?", I hear someone murmuring around me.

'Yeah, and they are even planning to give a holiday trip to the person who is going to win it,' says another.

They are my colleagues who are very keen on winning the boss's heart.

I just brush them off.

It's lunchtime, and while everyone else is looking forward to it, I'm trying to concentrate on how easily I can finish my job and get back home.

As I rise to eat my lunch, a peon approaches me and informs me that the boss has summoned me.

There you go! Now I've got to face my boss.

I'm sure he's upset about my absence from today's meeting.

I close my laptop and enter the boss's office.

He is sitting in his office, with a file on his desk, and an envelope propped up before him.

He is a 35-year-old man with white skin, a well-kept beard, and hairs that try their hardest to cover his scalp.

'Did you summon me, sir?' I ask in a nervous tone.

'Yeah, Aarush, sit.'

'I apologize for not being in today's meeting. I got stuck

A MERE NIGHTMARE

in traffic,' I speak.

'No issue, We cancelled it due to some reason. Well, How's your work going on? I have seen you working hard these days, and you have given your best to this date. Trust me, I'm impressed that you complete your work before time and have never taken much leave,' he speaks.

Wait, what? I was expecting him to act differently.

'Thank you very much, sir,' I say with a grin on my face.

'Actually, the board is planning to partner with a company in Shenzhen. And we need someone smart over there to manage it nicely and neatly. So I have an offer for you, as the person in charge of everything over there. It's a Fifteen-month project, so what do you think?' asks the boss.

'Thank you for putting me forward for this. But, I need to mull it over,' I respond to that.

'But you have until the end of the month to think about it. And let me know by the end of it. We have to prep it ahead of time because we have to schedule it by the end of the month,' says my boss in a deep voice.

'Certainly, sir. Thank you,' I reply.

With this, I exit the chamber and make my way to the canteen.

I place an order for a sandwich and a cup of coffee.

As I'm debating whether or not to accept the offer, a voice from behind me speaks up.

'Did you learn about the new boy on the design team, Mayank? It looks like he is going to get the employee of the month award,' says Tushar.

He is my colleague well as a close friend, serving both as my consultant and an extra pair of ears in the workplace. From who is going out on a date to who has just broken up,

from purchasing new items to missing anything, there is something about everyone. This person knows it all.

'No, I don't. Anyway, I don't give a damn who wins employee of the month,' I say.

'Yes. That makes sense. Anyways, Mr Sharma, has his third child come into the world again,' he adds up with a grin.

'Wait, what? But, last year, he celebrated the birth of his second son.

Is there anything else to say?' I chuckle.

'It's so funny, right? Seema told me about it,' he continues.

'The fellow has a lot of balls, that's for sure,' I add.

He exclaims, 'And those are true balls of steel, as well.'

'Here, have some coke?' he asks.

'No, I'm good.'

'All right then, see you later, buddy,' he says as he walks away.

After I've finished my lunch, I return to my desk.

Although my hand is moving on the keyboard and my eyes are watching the words appear on the page, my mind still sees this stranger from the last night.

This girl I met in a club.

I don't know, but somewhere I guess the girl's beauty left an imprint on my mind.

But I get down to my business.

Later, while working on the program's compilation, I glance at the time; it's 5.45 p.m.

I save my codes, and by the time they're uploaded to the cloud, I've taken out my phone to text Viku.

I text, '*Bro, let's meet tonight, drinks on me.*'

Shortly afterwards;

A MERE NIGHTMARE

'Oh, Aarush, I have something important to tell you as well, so let's meet,' he says.

'Sure, let's meet tonight at the bar,' I reply.

'Sure, I'll be there by 7,' he texts.

'All right. bye, see you later.'

After uploading the program, I close my laptop and pack my bags.

I can already see people watching me like a thief as soon as I get up.

So, straight, I hold my head and walk out.

* * *

Four

Vikrant



I'm already waiting for him in the pub, and it's about 7:30 p.m.

He said he'd be here by seven o'clock, but I forgot to note that he's prone to being late.

We haven't sat down together for a long time.

I've been busy touring the country.

Like anyone else, I decided to live my life by the motto, "Trying anything and all".

From sweating as a chef to serving as a marketing intern for a health-care product, from lifestyle photographer to merely sitting in my room and taking those awful courses offered by motivational speakers these days, I've done it all.

Well, I came back to Bangalore when things were hard on me and I was thinking of pursuing my studies.

I know, it seems absurd, after living and surviving off-grid for six years, to be walking the same road again.

A MERE NIGHTMARE

My phone rings, and it's Sam on the other end.

'Viku, where have you gone, man?

'Did you meet him yet?' he inquires.

'No, he hasn't arrived yet,' I sigh.

'All right, when are you coming back?' he asks.

'I'll be leaving tomorrow evening,' I say.

'All right, shall I come to get you?' he asks.

'No, it's all right. But don't tell her that I'm coming, Sam. I'd like to surprise her.'

'All right, I won't. Anyway, take care, and I'll call you tomorrow,' Sam says as he hangs up the phone.

More than 20 minutes after waiting for him to appear, he eventually arrives. He turns up in a black coat, a black pair of trousers, and black shoes.

He walks towards me and sits in front of me wearing the sweet idiotic grin on his face.

'What took you so long?' I enquire.

'Now, don't behave like you're my boss,' he utters grabbing the seat.

He answers, "You know how bad the traffic is here, and yet you blame me for being late."

'All right, Chill. How about having something to eat? I am starving already,' he speaks as he waves at a waiter.

'Get us the chicken kebabs and chicken nuggets with a tower and some fries,' he looks at me and asks, 'What about you? Oh, Sorry, bring paneer chilli and veg noodles,' he asks the waiter.

'Sure, sir,' says the waiter.

'Did you get dumped for being vegan?' I mock.

'It's real. Being a vegan was tedious. And, my friend, life is all about change,' he says.

‘Really? At the very least, have the moto in your professional life,’ I reply.

‘Come on, don’t start all over again,’ he snatches his gaze.

‘I mean, why shouldn’t I? If you are still working in that company, you must be living a pathetic life.’

‘Things have changed; the days when I had fun on my dad’s money were different. And now, I got the responsibility of a patient mother and a retired father. Do you believe I’ve just dumped the idea and never thought it? I gave it my best effort. Every day I wish to return to our path, but I know it can’t be done,’ he says.

‘That’s where you go wrong, because we do have a choice, and we always will. However, we are all so scared of change that we seldom attempt to push ourselves to our limits. You, unlike me, had something tangible to jump over. Ironically, I was the one who took the risk,’ I respond.

‘Yet, returning to the pavilion,’ he grins.

‘All things considered, yes, but at least I gave it a shot,’ I respond.

Meanwhile, they’re providing the drinks of heavenly bliss on our sideboard.

‘Anyways, you were going to say something very significant?’ he asks, sipping his cold beer.

‘How did the interview go?’

‘Yes, I received the admission letter, and I’ll be leaving for home tomorrow,’ I reply.

‘Wow, that’s fantastic, but have you told her about the acceptance letter yet?’ he inquires.

‘He paused and then said, “Well, No, I didn’t, I was going to tell her in person,” I react.

Three years is a long time, to reveal everything over a call.

A MERE NIGHTMARE

And please, it's a questionable thing, I know. But instead of calling it idiocy, I like to say that I was on a quest for my dreams.

'Would you want me to drop you off at the station tomorrow?' he asks.

'Nah, it's okay, I'll manage,' I react.

I say, 'So?' as another jug of beer rolls down my throat. Wanking still?

'Fuck you! But hey, you know what? I met a girl yesterday,' he speaks everything about a strange girl he met last night.

'So you don't have her number, and you think you'll meet her again? in this awfully crowded city?' I speak.

'Well, I'm not sure of it either. Yet, I have this gut feeling that we may cross our paths again,' Aarush replies.

'Great! Good luck with that,' I chuckle.

'Until then, enjoy the beautiful night,' he shouts.

'Cheers! To the hope!' we shout.

* * *

Five

Ritika



What a lovely Saturday morning.

I look out of the window as I see sparrows sat on my porch, chirped out and sang their liberation.

How time is flying is curious.

It seems like yesterday, I have been wandering around the nations for the last eight months since my degree.

I had a few plans after graduation, just like any other hot blood.

I had to fill up my bucket lists too.

I packed my bag and, along with my friends, travelled around the nations.

Bathing in beautiful Tinago falls in the Philippines and surfing the golden blue waters of the beaches of Croatia, from barren lands in Australia to lush rain forest in Havana.

For the first time in my life, I felt the freeing of my heart and got a real taste of it.

A MERE NIGHTMARE

From having a Dune Dinner in the middle of the desert to having a hot bowl of Maggie and a cup of tea over 18000 feet above sea level in the snow-covered mountains of Ladakh, I relished every adventure one could taste with freedom.

I experimented with flavorful, brilliant foods, and discovered numerous wondrous people.

That was a good eight months of my life.

And that one ride was even more unusual than the others.

It was the month of February, and I was on my second last day of a journey up north of India when I encountered this stranger.

She, like us, travelled to Shimla with their group.

We were staying at the same resort, Tag Resorts Oakwood Hamlet, which was located near Shoghi Lane.

It was a cold and lovely night with stars illuminating up the sky.

I was wide awake, so I decided to go for a stroll instead.

I left the hotel and began trekking uphill.

Well, it wasn't only me who was having trouble falling asleep.

I noticed a lady sitting alone on the cliffs beside the lane, concealed under her Woolley coat.

She appeared to be on the verge of tumbling over the precipice.

I stepped closer to her, rubbing my arms together.

'I don't think dying in this beautiful night is a good idea,' I said.

'Is it unbelievable? The cold air, kissing your cheeks. Telling you to give away all your sorrow and just embrace the beauty of nature,' she uttered.

'Yeah, it does feel like a blessing,' I said.

'By the way, I'm Ritika.'

'Zara,' in a low, sweet tone, she responded.

'Well, nice to meet you, Zara.

Where are you from?' I asked.

'I'm from Chandigarh, and you?' she replied.

'I'm from Bangalore.'

'Oh, the silicon valley of India,' she speaks.

"Yeah...So what do you do? I mean you work or still in college?" I asked.

'Well, I'm working as a Sony India Marketing Head,' she answered.

'Nice, it must be very cool to work for such a big company and be in such a high place.'

She chuckled, 'Yes it is, but as long as you are interested in working under a lot of pressure and love to deal with the competitions, watching different presentations every day.'

'Well, it sounds awful.'

'Nope! And I have to love it and it's part of my work. But I'm okay because they see you as an independent woman who doesn't need someone to look after her things,' she said.

I guffaw, 'Lady, you sound tough.'

'To be just, I'm,' she replied.

She gazed to the horizon and uttered,

'Life is complicated, sweetheart; if you don't have a vision of yourself.'

After all, a man without a conscience is a lost man.

So you must have rules and limits of your own else you are as good as a puppet to this society.'

I simply give a gentle utterance.

'Then, when are you going back?' she asked.

'The morning after tomorrow,' I responded.

A MERE NIGHTMARE

‘All right, you might join us for tomorrow’s small upmarket ride, then I guess?’ she asked.

‘Sure, I’m glad you asked; it’ll be a lot of fun.’

‘All right, then, let’s get some rest because we have to leave early tomorrow,’ she replied.

‘Fine...’ I uttered.

She gave me a warm embrace and then left, leaving me alone to enjoy the night’s romance.

* * *

Six

Ritika



The next day, at dawn...

'Ritika, wake up, it's already 6 a.m, and we have to leave right now,' Zara said.

'Come on, Zara. I haven't had enough sleep. Please give me another five minutes.'

'All right, then, I'm going. I thought it will be fun to go out with you, but I guess you are already having fun,' she said in a mocking tone.

'Ugh, Zara. Seriously? How can you do that to me, dude?' I exclaimed.

'So wake up and get dressed. I'm waiting in the lobby,' Zara replied and exited the room.

I showered and prepared myself.

As I entered the lobby, I noticed her explaining everything to her friends.

'You look great,' she said.

A MERE NIGHTMARE

I smiled and said, 'Thank you. By the way, do you mind if my friends accompany us?'

'No issue,' she replied.

'So, first and foremost, we'll visit the Tibetan market. I've heard they're popular for their handmade stone jewellery, woollen clothing, and elegant mufflers, among other things. Then we'll go to Minchy's outlet in Shoghi; locals told me that their jams are the souvenir of Tibet,' I explained excitedly.

So we left the resort in their Jeep and moved towards the Tibetan market. We moved amidst the valley's beautiful ice-covered mountains, While these impressive scenes piqued my curiosity and gave me a sense of liberation.

With every moment passed on that road, I could feel the chains breaking off my feet.

We stopped at a divergent road, whose one way headed to Bhutwa and others towards our Tibetan market.

We saw a small Dhaba made of woods and stones at the very mouth of it. Gazing the appearance of it, we walked into it and discovered a small compartment, covered with the floor with woollen sheets and blankets.

Everything seems to be well managed here, despite the shabby look of the owner sitting at the counter.

A small boy wearing a red sweater and a cute knit cap walks up to us and speaks, 'Hello ma'am. We have tea, coffee, Kawa, Momos, Maggie, etc. what would you like to order.'

'What is your name little guy,' I asked

'Chiru,' he answered in a low kind tone.

'Okay, Chiru, bring me a Kawa and one plate, Momos,' I replied.

While Zara decided to stick with the Maggie.

After paying the bill and tipping the little guy Chiru, we left towards the Tibetan refugee market.

The street is bustling with people interested in purchasing handcrafted products and bargaining.

I can't deny that as soon as I walked into the store, I could feel the pull of those artistic necklaces encrusted with elegant large black stones.

Those lovely sweaters and fluffy woollen blankets seemed ecstatic.

After purchasing all that enticed us with its elegance and allure, we overheard everyone talking about skiing.

'So, what say?' she stares at me and adds, 'Should we go?'

'But I don't know how to skate; what if I fall?' I answered.

'Seriously, Drama queen? I'll show you how to do it,' she exclaims.

She said, 'OK, but I'll sit on the bench.'

'All right. Now let's go!' she uttered while dragging me with her.

Later, We reached on top of a stunning grey and white mountain with miles upon miles of stretched snow beds.

We gathered our belongings and entered the arena. While everyone was enjoying the rides, I went and sat on the bench, watching someone.

That day, believe me, I found someone who taught me how to live and appreciate the gifts of life.

I'm not sure if it was her enchanting voice or her warm spirit, but she was impossible to ignore.

She caught me looking at her and approached me.

'Are you sure you don't want to do this?' she asked with welcoming hands.

Eventually, I gave in to her persuasion and climbed on the

A MERE NIGHTMARE

board.

I held her hand and carried myself to the up terrain, while she was teaching her how not to fall.

Confide in her, I somehow couldn't slip after a few falls.

With some overconfidence, I unhooked myself and began moving towards the barrier, and by the time I could control my feet, I was already lying on the ground partially covered in the snow. While she guffawed rolling on the ground.

Thereafter, we had a delicious hot chocolate, did some sledge race, and chowed some toasted marshmallows.

Ironically, she was a stranger to me just a night ago, and now we are having a great time with each other

Later, at dusk, we came to a halt at Shoghi.

Zara and I went to Minchy's outlet to taste it.

Wow, it was just incredible and the best jam I've ever tasted.

People here claim that they're the oldest jam maker.

So we packed a few things and headed to the resort.

'All right, Zara, I'll see you at dinner,' I said tiredly.

'Yeah sure take some rest I'll see you at the dinner,' she answered.

I went to my room and as soon as I got my shoes off and got in bed, with the sound of the birds chirping in the window and dim yellowish light fading from the room I slept.

The next day, early in the morning; I woke up and realized I stood up Zara for the dinner.

I was upset but I was about to leave.

Later, I went to the lobby and gave my bags to the driver while my eyes searched for her.

I walked out and went towards the cliff. There she stands,

the lady of the night.

'I am really sorry Zara. I don't know when I just dozed off,' I spoke.

'It's alright,' she mutters.

She put a hand in her pocket and took out a handmade necklace from it. And said, 'I never knew a small trip like this will ever give me a chance to meet such a sweet person like you. You are too naive Ritika but smart enough to keep yourself safe,' she speaks (like a mother)

I merely smile.

'Then, what are your plans after going back, she asked calmly.

'I haven't planned anything but for now, I'm travelling and trying everything I wanted to in my life, I replied.

'Come and stay at my place, if you ever visit Chandigarh, I would be glad to show you the place.

'Where do your parents stay? I bet your mom doesn't make butter chicken like mine do,' she spoke.

'Well maybe, but mine is no more,' I replied.

'Ah...I'm sorry,' she speaks and holds my hand.

'It's okay, it's been many years now,' I replied.

'Well, you didn't bring any goodbye gift huh?' she threw a smile.

'I'm really sorry I didn't know,' I utter.

'It is okay. Just promise our paths will cross again,' she speaks.

I chuckle and speak, 'Yeah...I promise.'

She hugs me tight and grins brightly.

Holding me in her arms, she speaks, 'Well, this is it, be in touch and take care.'

I reply, 'Yeah sure, you to take care of yourself too.'

A MERE NIGHTMARE

So we get apart and set back on our journey.

Well, after that, I travelled to many places and completed much from my bucket list.

* * *

Seven

Vikrant



As the train reaches the station, I climb down and start walking towards the exit. It was an overwhelmingly long journey. Well, it was the strangest train journey I've ever had in my life. Not the trip, but perhaps, the fellow passenger that made it curious. The stranger climbed the train at Yelanka with a heavy tracking bag.

He walked in wearing a huge smile, kept his bag on the seat in front of me, and asked, 'Is anybody sitting here?'

'Yeah, one guy. He went to the washroom, I guess.'

'Fine,' he replied and got up.

A minute later, the guy arrives, giving a weird look at him.

'What is it?' the stranger asked.

'This seat is mine,' the guy spoke with a harsh tone.

'Then sit bro, who is keeping you from it. Mine is not confirmed, so just lay me a bit of space for some time,' he replied with a warm voice.

A MERE NIGHTMARE

' No, we can't because we are three people sitting here,' he speaks.

' Oh really! Where are the other two?' the stranger asked.

' They are going to climb at the very next station. So kindly leave the seat,' the guy spoke.

He was looking like day labourers who worked on daily wages and was going back home with his friends, and with his barbaric nature, he was talking, seemed that he won't think twice to hit this man.

But things didn't go the way I thought. He got off his seat and spoke, "What's your problem? It's your seat, but you could ask politely. And anyway, you aren't sleeping now. So stay quiet down there, I'll get up later."

So, the man sat down in the seat and started dialling numbers in his cell.

At the very next station, his mates arrive, and they were talking about something.

The moment the train started, they all came to him, pulled his legs, and threatened him to come down.

But I didn't see any fear in his eyes.

He knelt down and began punching them in the face.

They grabbed his collar, threw him down, and began kicking him on the back and punching him in the face. Nobody came forward to put a stop to this madness.

Thus, I plunged into it.

I kicked one guy in the face and jumped on the other.

The other person pulled me from the back and struck me in the face as I tried to help him get up on his knee.

I was knocked.

But he managed to beat the crap out of them, and the chain was pulled.

Within a few minutes, the police arrived, and everyone explained what had happened; those guys were arrested, and we were spared, albeit with a bribe.

Well, I'm sure you see the irony in what happened.

Nonetheless, it occurred.

While helping him, washing his face, I spoke, 'you okay?'

'It's nothing, I have dealt with this kind of idiots before and know which language they understand. Well, thanks for helping. I owe you. Akash, by the way, and you are?' he speaks with a big smile on his face.

'Vikrant.'

'So Vikrant, where are you heading?' he asked.

'Gujarat, and you?'

'Jaipur, going to meet a friend of mine,' he replied.

'So you are from Rajasthan?' I spoke

'Yes,' he looks into the mirror, 'So what do you do in Bangalore?'

'I was a marketing intern but thought of continuing my studies again. so going home to meet my parents once.'

'Okay, that sounds great,' he spoke.

'Well, I didn't want to do it in the first place, but fate dragged me straight back, where I left.'

'So, what did you wanted to do?'' he asked.

'I wanted to start something on my own.'

'You look ambitious, that's great actually. But I suggest you get more experience and figure out deeply, how a company is managed,' Akash spoke.

'Yeah, I will. Thanks,' I answered, having my seat.

'What about you? what do you do?'

'I had a business in Bangalore. But, things went south, and I was forced to close the store. So, now I am looking

A MERE NIGHTMARE

for something big. That's the reason I'm going to meet my friend,' he replied.

'Oh, okay, good luck.'

So we sat together talking about our lives and spent the whole night talking.

We grew so close that we exchanged phone numbers and decided to meet when we returned to Bangalore.

I am on my way home in a cab.

Meanwhile, as I consider how to tell her the truth, my blood has already frozen.

For she still thinks I have completed my graduation.

However, I must concede to her, I will have to tell her eventually, but now is not the time.

Anyway, I haven't squandered her money over the years.

I instead earned some for myself.

These walls, believe me, remind me of growing up in a middle-class home. A

nd I have always despised it.

It's not because I didn't get what I wanted or because I didn't go on a summer break like my classmates.

But the sake of very reason called respect.

I've been hungry for it all my life.

Show me some respect, and I'll be pleased to assist you, and I'll go through with a large grin on my face

But soon, I realized.

The honour, I seek is given only to two individuals.

First, god himself that I could never become and another who has a lot of money.

So somewhere, this idea had me so enthralled that I couldn't wait to start working.

Hence, I dropped out of college and started working as an assistant photographer.

I spent all my earning in parting and chilling out with my friends and going out for vacation once in three months.

but at some stage, I felt that the salary I was getting did not quite suffice for my ambitions

It took a while to understand that small jobs aren't going to help me get closer to my goals.

So I thought of going back to school to obtain my graduate degree.

The part of me that harbours bitterness often knows that I've squandered a significant time in my life.

My mom is a single parent, a government school teacher, and I have a younger sister who is in the final year of her MBA program.

Money is something we both are fond of.

I recall Aarush, myself, and Sam making a pact in elementary school and keeping evidence of it for each other.

He made it sound as if he didn't want to have anything to do with corporate life in the future.

He used to talk like a leader, a visionary, who wanted to bring change, always hungry and ready to lead.

Well, this is what connected us the most.

Being different and unique, expecting more from life.

We used to spend nights talking about our lives and how money is the key to everything.

We both agreed to stay together and start our own company.

Well, Sam was different from us.

He was practical and a guy with a simple agenda (getting a job and settled).

A MERE NIGHTMARE

He differs a lot with us in thoughts yet, was our love.

He was the heart of our blissful moments and the spark of our smile.

And look where we've ended up after all these years: Aarush is doing what he's always despised, and I've destroyed my life by loving and working to realize my pitiful dreams.

We paid the price of dreaming too high and thinking out of the box.

After all, Aarush is still capable of realizing his ambitions.

Whereas Sam is already doing what he always wanted to.

What am I suppose to do now?

I enter the home and find my mum cooking in the kitchen, I reach her with warm arms and hug her from behind.

Tears welled up in her precious eyes; she is seeing me for the first time in three years, and this much drama is to be expected.

You finally found some time for us, look at you, became so thin and weak.

God knows what you are feeding yourself back there after working hours in the office.

Well, I didn't speak much and request her for a hot water bath.

It's nine o'clock in the morning, and she's busy gathering her things and getting ready to go to school.

'Mum, I have something to talk to you important,' I speak softly.

'Even I, honey, have a lot to say. Don't worry, we've got a whole night to talk about all that has happened over the last few years. Get some rest and eat your breakfast. In the evening, we'll have a great chat. Bye,' she says, leaving me alone with my memories of playing in this house: my sweet

little home, where I grew up like a prince.

I took out my letter and give a gaze upon it. Trying to figure out how to tell her all that has happened in the last few years, as well as the biggest lie I've ever told. I suppose I'll have to wait until later in the evening.

* * *

Eight

Aarush



I walk into my empty apartment and toss the keys on the table.

I move heavy-footed with my long, dull strides to get a bottle of water from the fridge.

Slowly walking into my room, I tuck out my shirt and drop myself on the bed.

This is basically how I spend my evening after I get home from work.

In a nutshell, eat, sleep, work, and repeat.

It's been years since my graduation, and all I've done here is spent the majority of my time working on projects and attending meetings.

So, I could afford this lovely apartment on rent and a car on EMI to get to work on time.

As I hide my face in the pillow, my phone starts to ring.

'Aarush?' speaks my dad.

'Yeah, dad? What is it??' I speak with my sluggish tone. With his numb voice, he speaks, 'Your mother is in the ICU.'

I throw myself up on the bed as his words jolt my nerves. 'Why? what happened?' I inquire.

'She had a severe stomach ache this evening. So I took her to the hospital, where we discovered, she had severe abdominal swelling. The doctor has informed us that the surgery must be completed by tomorrow. Otherwise, delaying will only lead to further infection,' he adds.

'Dad, please, listen!!' you get the doctor to start the operation; I'll be there by morning.'

'All right, son,' I hang up the phone and begin packing my bag.

I sense a strange smell in the air, the scent of fear. I remember the days when I used to feel sick, and mum would carry me in her arms, feeding me with her own hands. The warmth of her body felt like rescuing. But how do you not feel vulnerable when you see your guardian angel fall to her feet? While my hand is feeling the cold air pass by, kissing my palm and leaving it as a sad goodbye, my mind is still filled with the fear of losing her.

Finally, I reach the airport. I walk to the counter and take my tickets.

There occurs an announcement,

"Hello everyone, please pay attention, all flights have been delayed by one hour due to bad weather, we sincerely apologize for the inconvenience. Have a great journey."

It's been a bad hair day, starting with the office, then mum, and now this.

Everything seems to be conspiring against me today.

A MERE NIGHTMARE

So I sit in the lounge, swiping through my feeds.
So far, nothing seems to be able to lift my spirit.
So I tucked it away in my pocket and decided to take a rest.
In the lobby, I see a familiar face.
It's her, the girl from the club.
I never imagined I'd be seeing her again.
She approaches me and takes a seat in front of me.
I don't say a word and ignore her presence.
For a brief moment, she looks at me, as if trying to
recognise my face.

Then, all of a sudden, she exclaims, 'Hey! Remember me?
From the club, Ritika.'

I simply nod and give a friendly grin.

'Well, I guess we were supposed to meet again. or wait a
minute, are you following me?'

Ritika expresses herself (laughing).

'Seriously?' embarrassed my ass makes me dive into my
phone again.

'I'm sorry, I was just messing with you,' she chuckles.

She takes her bag and approaches me.

Staring straight on my face, she speaks, 'You okay?? you
seem a little troubled.'

'Ah.actually I am having a bad day. So, finding it difficult
for any sarcasm,' I reply.

'Well, in that case, some hot coffee and some nice conver-
sation will probably lift your spirit,' she replies.

Raising back on her feet, she picks her bag and lays her
hand towards me, 'Get up now, let's go.'

'Okay,' I take her hand and get off my sit. Her hand really
felt warm like a blanket in some cold empty night. It is soft
like the petals of a rose and gave a feeling of a heeler.

We walked to the food court and ordered two cups of hot chocolate and took our seats; from where we could get a better view of this beautiful night.

'I apologize for that day. I disturbed your privacy and said so many things to you,' she speaks.

'It's okay,' I reply, stirring my drink.

'So aren't you going to ask anything?' she says, holding the cup close to her mouth and staring into my eyes with that innocent gaze.

Before I could even think of any word to put on the table, she speaks, 'Okay, I'll start. I am going to Germany with some work but first going to meet a friend in Mumbai.'

'And what about you, where are you flying to?' she asks.

'Home,' I reply Softly.

'Where??' she asks curiously.

'Gujarat, my mum, is serious and the doctor is telling us to get the operation done. So Heading back.'

'Please accept my sincere apologies; don't worry, everything will be perfect. Is there anything I can do to assist you?' she asks, taking my hand in her warm, delicate hands.

It feels so good when a woman cares about you; it's the ultimate feeling you can get in your miserable life. When you are a kid, you have a woman as a mother. Who cares about you like a delicate piece of art and loves you with all her heart. And when you get older, you have a woman who cares for you more than anything in this world and loves you with everything she can offer. No wonder they are the symbol of love and joy.

A MERE NIGHTMARE

'A prayer maybe,' I reply.

Caressing my hands she whispers, 'Sure...'

'Well, how long have been here in Bangalore?' she asks.

'Well, I have been here for the past seven years, and now I work in IT. What about you?'

'I was born here. But my dad is from Delhi,' she replies.

'And mum?' I ask.

'she was from Jaipur.'

'Was?' I ask with a stern look.

'She died long back when I was a kid,' she replies.

'I'm sorry,' I speak.

'It's okay. It doesn't bother me much as my sister raised me with so much love and care that I never really missed her. She is everything to me,' she replies.

'What about your dad? where is he?' I ask.

'Hmm... He lives in Germany with my stepmom and stepbrother,' she replies.

'So you are going to meet them?'

'Not like a family reunion. We don't talk anymore. He left us after my mother's death and flee Germany back to his business. So it's just some business meeting with them.'

'Ohh. Okay,' I utter.

Her phone starts to ring.

She looks at it for a few moments.

And grabbing the tissue from the table, she gently wipes her lip.

It rings once more.

She picks it up and speaks, "Hey, Di."

"I am with my friend's birthday."

She puts her phone aside and speaks, 'Call me and say it's urgent.'

‘What?’ I exclaim, perplexed.

She roughly whispers, ‘Call my name and say it’s getting late to cut the cake.’

‘Oh, Ritika! Come on, let’s go! It’s almost time to cut the cake,’ I yell.

While Everybody around us, stares at me, as If I am mentally retarded.

“No...No, I am going to Pondicherry tonight.”

“Yeah, I’ll be back in two days.”

“Yeah... Thank you, Di. Love you, bye.”

She disconnects with a deep breath.

She looks at me while I stare with a huge question mark on my face.

‘What?’ she asks.

‘She doesn’t know you are going to meet your father, right?’ I look at her sceptically.

‘It’s complicated,’ she utters.

I remain silent.

‘Then tell me something more about you,’ she speaks.

Well, the last time I heard this question, was during my job interview.

Before I could respond, one of the airport staff began making an announcement saying that the flight is ready to leave.

So I gather my belongings and say, ‘All right then. This is it.’

‘Ahh...Goodbye,’ she utters.

I hesitantly hug her and rush towards the boarding line without looking back.

As I walk through the boarding, I hear her calling my name from behind.

A MERE NIGHTMARE

I turn back and see her holding my wallet.

I approach her with an awkward grin on my face.

‘Ohh god, thank you so much,’ I speak.

‘Don’t be so careless, Mr Aarush,’ she speaks, teasing me with a smirk.

‘I was in a hurry, so I might have dropped it. Thanks again,’ I add.

‘Okay then, Goodbye,’ she speaks and hugs me warmly.

For a brief moment, we both lock our gazes on each other.

As if we were both waiting for the other to say something.

Unfortunately, before any of us could say something, a staff member interrupts us and asks me to board.

I watch her leave, as I pass through the boarding gate.

So I board the plane and settle into my seat, regretting that I don’t have her phone number.

When I take out my wallet to put my ticket safe in it, I notice a tissue paper folded inside.

I never kept one, as far as I recall.

So I take it out and find a cell phone number and something written on the back.

“I’ll pray for your mom. And lucky you, we don’t have to meet by fate again...”

- Ritika

* * *

Nine

Ritika



I relax into my seat and check my surroundings.

There sits an old couple in my front seat leaning on one another, like those wrinkled-faced fat couples, we see and awe early morning in the park.

A mid 30's man, wearing a suit, is punching hard on his laptop keys, it seems the man is running late against his schedules.

I see, the air hostess passing by, people sleeping under their blanket, a little girl with smooth black hairs, shining eyes, and pinkish cheeks sits with her mother beside me.

She is curious and enjoying everything happening around her while her mother going through a bunch of papers.

Gazing, reading it with great curiosity, and turning the pages.

At the same time, she holds the little one's hand.

It gave me a glimpse of my childhood; when I used to travel

A MERE NIGHTMARE

with my mom.

She used to make me wear that pinky, fluffy, and warm clothes with a beautiful knitted cap.

My mum was quite a generous and bold personality, for she used to work a lot and saved the company from the verge of bankruptcy and meanwhile doing some social work for the poor orphan kids.

For my sister, she was an idol.

I remember the bedtime stories and poems she used to tell us, it was overwhelming.

All of the little girl's pleasant and warm vibes start fading as her mother poisons the air with her tears.

It is tough for me to control my curiosity sometimes. So, putting my hand on her shoulder, I ask, 'Is everything okay mam?'

'Yeah...Yeah, everything is alright,' she speaks with some uneasiness and shiver in her voice.'

'Are you sure?' I ask.

'Yeah, thanks for asking,' she replies.

While holding her hand and caressing her daughter, I gaze upon those papers; dear lord, It's custody papers. She had filed a case against her daughter's custody.

That poor girl doesn't even know that she might not see her mother again.

How peculiar the world is, these poor kids have to bear the pain and suffering caused by their parent's egoistic and foolish decisions.

Why bear a child, when you are not sure of your floundering relationships.

The poor girl remains, playing around with the headphones in her hand, oblivious to what will happen to her.

She might not see her mother ever again.

She might never feel her warmth again, or maybe she won't be gifted with beautiful dolls or cute fluffy teddies and delicious cupcakes by her dad.

In a nutshell, she's going to be me.

While the little one is so curious and happy.

She is still staring at the screen, watching some cartoons.

We skim the fog and the cities down, glimmering in the night. While the crescent moon rests under the blanket of the cloud.

Well, Aarush, is a nice name.

And he seemed a nice guy. What a charming and kind personality he was, but the poor guy is going through a lot.

I hope his mother gets well soon.

It feels everyone is lost and disappointed with something in their life.

Well, it's a fact that no matter how Discrete and different we think we all are, there's one thing that still binds us together, Hope.

A hope to prosper, and a mere desire to survive another day with our misery crawling behind.

Anyways, I just hope he calls.

I'll be glad to meet him again.

So with the little one finally sleeps in her mother's arms and getting a cosy feeling by her warmth. I close my eyes and slowly drift into the darkness.

* * *

Ten

Aarush



It's five o'clock in the morning.

Driving through the closed shops, and old glimmering streetlights with a few people passing by, for the morning walk.

As soon as I arrive at the hospital, I enter and proceed to the reception area.

'Can you please tell me where is the room of a patient named Neeta Raghuvanshi?'

She looks up the record and says, 'Second floor, ICU.'

'Thank you,' I say as I stride towards her place.

I see my father on the bench, alone, napping. I walk over to him and pay homage to him by placing my hands on his feet. I avoid disturbing him and approach the door to peek into her room.

Oh lord, look, there sleeps my beautiful mom; fighting against this thing. I could already feel the fear, lurking in my

mind and made me all the more aware of how helpless I am.

The doctor arrives, and we proceed to his cabin.

'How is she doing now, Doctor?'

I inquire.

'She is doing spectacularly well. She's fortunate. Your dad brought her on time. For, any further delay would have led the infection to spread more and lead to kidney failure. Anyways, don't worry. Dr Anshuman Rastogi has been summoned and will arrive by 9 a.m,' he speaks.

'Couldn't he come a little earlier?' I ask.

'He already had several appointments, but I asked him to perform the surgery. So, I request you to keep some patience,' he replies.

I merely nod.

'All right then, excuse me, please.

I need to leave for the routine check,' he says and walks away.

My phone begins to ring softly in my pocket; it's Viku.

'Yeah hello viku, you reached?' I inquire.

'Yeah, man, I'm having my breakfast right now. So, how about you? Punching keys as usual?' he replies.

'Nah Bro, I'm back in town. I arrived this morning.'

'Wait, what? Are you kidding me? You missed me so much that you took the flight and planned for a surprise?' he chuckles.

'No way. But I wish, I'd come for that. Actually mum was serious so came to get the operation done,' I answer.

'What? How is she now?' he asks with a frown.

'She is doing okay. Anyway, I'll catch up with you later,' I reply.

'Yeah, sure, man. Take care of her,' he says as he discon-

A MERE NIGHTMARE

nects.

* * *

Eleven

Ritika



I'm finally at my father's office, waiting for him to finish the meeting.

The soft, slightly warm sunlight is filtering through the windows.

Behind his chair is an image of my father and his family, my stepmom and stepbrother.

It appears that he is very happy with them.

So there he comes, wearing a black suit and shiny black shoes, he is really changed, old to be precise.

His hairs have turned grey, he got wrinkles around his eyes, yet has maintained himself quite well in the light of fitness.

I'm guessing my stepmother maintains a strict diet for him alone.

Since my brother seems to be a little overweight in comparison to my father and stepmother, like those spoiled

A MERE NIGHTMARE

rich kids in the films.

Who hasn't figured out, how to tie his aglet yet?

He walks next to me and speaks, 'How are you? We finally meet again. But, no offence, I was hoping to see your sister.'

'That's fine, but I was the one who called you on the phone,' I speak.

'Wait, what? I thought It was Ana. Wow, it's difficult to tell the difference,' he says, his laugh unsettling.

'It doesn't matter because the business you're referring to will now be managed by me. I'm going to be in charge of it, so talk to me,' I speak.

'What? So the newbies are now running the company?' he talks with a smirk on his lips and his brows lifted to display his absolute vanity.

'Wonderful! So I don't have to be concerned,' he adds.

'Don't be in darkness, Mr Mathur, I merely need a year to ruin, whatever you built for your whole pathetic life. And don't worry, I'll spare your wife and son.'

'How dare you talk about your family in that manner?' he exclaims angrily.

'Is this what your mother has taught you??' he adds.

'Family? Do even you remember it?' I utter.

Staring straight into his eyes, I speak, 'I thought we were dead for you after our mother left you alone with your lousy nature. And please leave, mother out of it. You have no right to talk about her. For us, you were already gone.'

Now, I'm here as a representative of our company. So, listen, we're going to move into your territory, and when we do, I'll make certain that our company deposes you. And I promise you, Mr MATHUR, I will bring you and your family to the streets,' I say, as I walk out of the building with a fire

in my heart.

I hail a taxi to whisk me straight to the airport.

I enter and dial my sister's phone. But she doesn't respond.

That man was talking about business rivalry to his own daughter; I thought he'd changed, that he'd missed me after all these years.

But how hurtful is it that he was expecting my sister instead of me, and for what, a fucking business meeting? I'm embarrassed by the fact that his blood courses through my veins.

I shout, 'Stop the car!'

'But ma'am, we haven't arrived yet,' the poor fellow responds.

'Stop the fucking car, I said,' I yell.

'Fine...fine,' he says.

He pulls the car aside.

I rush out of the car and drop myself on the seat nearby.

My eyes welled up with tears.

A moment later, 'Take it, wipe your tears,' says the cab driver, a short man with reddish-white skin, beautiful sharp blue eyes and black curly hairs; stands in front of me, laying his handkerchief.

He looks like a mid 20s guy.

'Thank you,' I reply and wipe my tears.

'You know, sometimes a stranger can be the best person to share your sorrow,' he utters, having a seat beside me.

'It's alright. I appreciate your concern.'

'You don't have to show gratitude, I just asked you as a human being,' he replies.

I just give a gentle utterance.

'By the way, I am Jan,' he speaks, bringing his hand forward.

A MERE NIGHTMARE

'Ritika,' I shake hands.

'You hungry?? Come with me. I'll introduce you to my wife, she'll be glad to meet you.'

'Well, it's fine, I don't want to bother you,' I reply.

He gets up and lays his hand forward, 'Oh come on, lady, you are not. Let's go,' he replies.

So we get in the car and start traversing towards his home.

'Hmm...so you're from here?' I speak.

'No, I am from Belgium, but I came here to start a new life with my girlfriend,' he replies.

'So, you ran from home?' I speak.

'No...no, she's German. We met on a social networking site and finally fell in love. It's been two years, and now I'm about to become a father,' he says, his face lit up with a big smile.

'She must be fortunate to have a man like you,' I speak.

'Actually, I'm the fortunate one; her presence in my life is nothing short of a blessing,' he speaks as his cheeks are flushed.

'Congratulations, by the way,' I speak.

'Thank you. So, Ritika, what brings you to hear?' he talks, his voice cracking as he tries to pronounce my name.

'Business meeting,' I speak.

'Well, a business meeting doesn't make you weep in the middle of the lane,' he speaks.

I remain silent.

After driving for some time, we reach an old, decrepit, two Store building.

In the midst of darkness, I walk right after him except the dim and yellow light over every door.

We climb to the second floor and walk to the end.

He knocks on the door and addresses Emilia, his wife.

With a sweet smile on her face and a pumped belly, a young lady, short and slightly chubby to fit into that dress, with short curly and golden hair, opens the door.

‘Emilia meet our friend....Rh??’ he struggles.

‘Ritika!’ I help him out.

‘RITIKA, from India,’ he adds.

‘Hello!’ I greet with a huge smile.

‘Hello! Nice to meet you,’ she replies with a warm hug.

They welcome me inside.

The generous fellow brings Frikadellen, a potato salad with sausage, whole grain bread, cheese, and a mixed vegetable salad, while her wife sits with me at the table.

I begin by tasting some sausage curry, and it truly fills my heart with joy to eat such delicious food.

‘It’s very delicious,’ I speak.

‘Emilia cooks so well that we considered opening a food cart, but we are still struggling. Because our savings do not match our budget. Despite this, her brothers continue to visit us and threaten us with debt repayment,’ he speaks.

‘What? Why didn’t you go to cops?’ I ask.

‘We couldn’t because if we go to cops, Jan may get arrested for not paying the debts,’ speaks Emilia.

I just stare at her sad expression and struggle to have another bite.

‘Hey chill, where did you take the matter to. Let her enjoy the food Em. Pardon me please,’ he speaks.

After getting finished, I say a proper goodbye to Emilia and leave for the airport with Jan.

‘You really have a beautiful wife, take care of her properly,’ I speak as we drive through the city.

A MERE NIGHTMARE

'Yeah I will, I love her more than anything in this life,' he replies.

'Is there anything I can help you with?' I speak.

'No, I really appreciate you at least asked because most of them just avoid us,' he replies with a smile.

'Hmm. I hope things will get better soon.'

'Yeah, I hope so,' he replies.

So it took more time than we thought, but we are finally reached here. He drops me at the gate and speaks,

'We hope to get one more chance to show you our hospitality,' he speaks.

'Yeah sure, if I ever get a chance to come back here. Thanks a lot for such a delicious lunch once again, I really loved the food and your generous nature,' he smiles.

'Okay then, goodbye.'

'Goodbye,' I speak and walk away towards the terminal.

He gets into the car and finds a paper kept in the backseat, he reaches it and discovers around 1000 euros in cash. And a letter with it, which reads,

"Thanks a lot, for such hospitality to a stranger, the world needs people like you. Take care of your wife and child. I know this amount is not enough for you to pay off your debts but take it as a blessing to your unborn child. My best wishes are with you and your wife. Goodbye."

I smiled and waved at him from the inside.

He keeps his hand on his heart and waves at me.

* * *

Twelve

Aarush



Its is twenty past seven in the evening.

I return home after meeting my mother and placing flowers beside her bed.

When Viku arrives at the gate, he calls out my name.

I walk out and see him in his red hoodie and black jeans, his hair messy, as if he had just gotten out of bed.

Look what he brought, his bike. His Rani.

It is, in essence, the first thing I ever rode in my life.

I still remember an accident when I was learning to ride it.

Consequently, I ripped my favourite shirt that day.

'Hey, how are you?' he asks as he wraps his arms around me.

'Yeah, I'm fine,' I say.

'And your mother?' he inquires.

'Yeah, she's okay now,' I say.

A MERE NIGHTMARE

‘How about you?’

‘Did you discuss college with your mother?’ I ask.

‘I tried, but she was in a hurry in the morning, so I decided to tell her later,’ he says.

I look at him with scepticism.

‘Now, don’t give me that look. Let’s head over to Sam. I’ll explain everything,’ he speaks with that amazing and charming smile he owns.

My heart gets a sudden flashback to my childhood when I sit behind him.

Oh, my goodness!

Those rides and moments indeed tickle my belly.

‘By the way, do you remember the girl I mentioned? the one from the club?’ I speak.

‘Yeah, what about her?’ he asks as we pass the crowded bazaar.

‘We met again at the airport. We even had a cup of hot chocolates and had a pretty nice conversation,’ I reply.

‘So? Is she single? did you ask her out?’ he speaks.

‘I don’t know. I didn’t ask her anything like that. I was so worried about my mom that I didn’t think of any of such things. And even she was quite upset with her father.’

‘Okay. At least tell me you at least got her number?’ he speaks.

‘Yeah, I got it. In quite a dramatic manner.’

‘so Did you call?’ he asks.

‘Nope!’

‘No wonder you are still single. Such a dumb idiot you are, she gave her a number, with a fucking hint, that she is interested in you and what are you doing? Just keeping it stored in the contact list, waiting for someone else to take

her away,' he speaks.

And so we reach Sam's home.

He halts me and speaks, 'Remember, the girl and the time; they are the most desired thing by a man. Yet, once it's lost, it's lost. And if you get it, there's a probability that you won't get appropriate.'

We walk inside the compound and knock on his door.

And there he is, a little guy, with those bit of rabbit teeth, smiling at us, opens the door.

'Hey! Look at you, guess someone's feeding you well,' speaks Sam giving us a tight hug.

'Well, on the other hand, you seemed malnourished,' I reply.

'Got any plans or just going to spend the evening playing PS and watching shits,' Sam speaks.

'Let's go for a ride then,' says Viku.

'Okay, wait then, let me put on some better, warm clothes, and I'll get my bike out,' says Sam.

'Yeah, sure make it quick and take out your car, not bike. Else you'll again quarrel for getting Aarush, sit behind you,' replies Viku.

'Fine. And I don't do; It is he who likes sitting behind me because you drive like hell.'

'Drop it guys, go put on the clothes and come fast,' I intervene.

A few minutes later, he comes out wearing a hoodie and denim jacket over it and brings out his car.

'Why didn't you come rolled in the blanket? It would be warmer than this, right?' speaks Viku.

'HA...HA. very funny.'

'Let's go then,' I shout.

A MERE NIGHTMARE

So we drive towards the outskirts, blasting our speakers.

‘Bro, stop near the corner. Let me get some drinks,’ I speak.

‘Why you want to drink now? Dad will kill me, bro,’ speaks Sam.

‘Oh come on, you pussy, nothing will happen, chill,’ replies Viku.

‘Yeah, you don’t have to deal with such shit, but I have to.’

‘What do you mean by that?’ speaks vik.

‘Nothing, I m just telling you not to drink in the car,’ replies Sam.

‘Fine, we’ll have it outside. If you have a problem with that too? then fuck yourself.’

‘Whoa... Whoa, chill. Look at you both fighting like retards.

Let’s do a thing, we’ll have the drinks but not in the car, we’ll sit at our spot, and after getting a bit normal, we’ll go back home. okay?’

‘Yeah, cool,’ says Sam.

‘Then what was I trying to tell you?’ vik smack his head.

It is Viku’s nature to mock and bring the worse out of you.

He likes to do it somehow. Getting others irritated and making fun of people is something he loves to do

It’s pitch black everywhere but for the glimmering lights from a distant city.

While driving, we skim through the tall trees that rise high into the sky.

Admittedly, here it is quiet, free of the noise, the pollution, and free of all outside influences.

The air is crisp and thick.

As the cold air, brushed my face, I felt the rejuvenation of my soul.

I'm wondering if, in the race for survival, thriving on our phoney lifestyle, we've lost sight of the meaning of life.

Have you ever thought about it?

When was the last time you threw open your arms and let Mother Nature embrace you?

When was the last time you let those magnificent stars, the moon, that carries the storey of many love birds, amaze you?

And let the night's liberating darkness hide the ghosts of your past?

There are so many wonderful things and heavenly places in this world.

Despite this, we chose to live our lives as slaves and die with the hope of one day truly living them.

Believe me when I say that the moment you've been waiting for has already passed.

There is no such thing as the perfect moment; instead, it is up to us to make the time an enjoyable experience that we will remember for the rest of our lives.

After all, you never know if there will be another tomorrow.

If you'll ever be fit enough to climb the mountain you've always wanted to climb.

You won't be any older or wiser than you are now to start or accomplish something you've always wanted.

Life would never allow us to maintain our composure and give us time to plan for the right moment.

Until we make up our minds, plant our feet firmly on the deck, and scream at Life to seize the opportunity and make it the moment we've always imagined.

We stop our car near the mouth of the jungle, where we

A MERE NIGHTMARE

have this beautiful view of the whole city.

We use to come here during our school days whenever we were upset or wanted to spend some time together.

We pull out the drinks and raise our glasses to the stunning, glittering sky above us.

‘I really missed this moment, I speak.

‘Me too,’ replies Sam.

‘Life in the city is full of hustle, bro. We almost spend our whole day in the office and rest in the traffic, and with so little time we left with, we can hardly think of doing something else,’ says Viku.

‘Yeah, bro, I agree with that. But it does bless you with many opportunities too. If you think in light of hope,’ I reply.

‘Enlighten me??’ speaks vik.

‘Believe it or not, but Life isn’t as ideal and poetic as you think, Vikrant. Nobody’s Life is good enough to think about the purpose of their Life. Few are just doing whatever it takes to survive.’

He gulps the drink and speaks, ‘Tell me one thing, if life is about survival, about running, then what’s the deal in giving yourself a direction and run with everything you got? Because a run without a destination will take you nowhere. Maybe you’ll just end up running in the circle, forever.’

I give a slight nod and take a sip of my drink.

‘While mine is quite simple here. I go to the office in the morning and back by 6, spend the rest of my time watching tv.’

‘Great, What else one can expect from a sluggard like you,’ Viku replies.

‘What else am I suppose to do? Beside you idiots, I never made enough friends; and those I have are not the ones to

spend some time with, ' replies Sam.

After two bottles down, we were lying on the ground, high, except Sam, as he just drank a Breezer.

While watching stars, Viku speaks, 'Bro, we are grown-ups now, do you feel it?'

'Not Until I realize that I have many responsibilities on my shoulder like taking care of my parents. Which I am clearly failing to fulfil. Otherwise, when I spend time with you idiots, I literally become the same kid you knew from the secondary,' I reply.

'Never knew, we would grow so fast.'

'You remember the way we fought with each other? The way we used to prank the teachers and got punished, ' speaks Viku.

'And that girl from B section you liked? We did so many things for you to get her,' replies Sam.

'Yeah, very well,' he laughs.

'And later, she cheated you with that senior,' he laughs out loud.

'We literally beat the shit out that fucker Dude. And you remember what she said? When I asked her if she is cheating on me?' Viku replies.

'How can you think of me like that...' he adds.

'You are such an asshole!!' we all shout.

'Bitch she was...' speaks Sam.

I hold him up and speak, 'Hey, come on, Don't use such vulgar word. She was his first love, remember?' we both roll on the floor, laughing out loud.

'Fuck you!!' Viku shouts and jumps upon me.

Holding my neck, he starts wrestling. So does Sam joins this madness and starts kicking his ass.

A MERE NIGHTMARE

Soon, tired, our backs, rests on the ground.

We laze down and stare at the sky above us.

'Love you idiots,' Viku whisper.

'Love you, bro,' we both reply.

Suddenly he gets up and speaks, 'Wait a minute. Give me your phone.'

'Huh? why?' I ask out of surprise.

He takes out my phone from the pocket and starts swiping the contact list.

'What are you doing, Viku? To whom are you calling?' I keep repeating.

'Just, having some fun,' he replies as he dials Ritika's number.

I try to grab the phone, but Sam holds me off, 'Don't call her bro.'

'Shut the up,' he shouts.

'What the hell, bro give me that god damn phone,' I speak, but both drag me down on the floor and sit on me.

I struggle to snatch my phone yet couldn't move an inch.

Viku comes close to my face and speaks, 'You don't like her?'

'Bro, I have just met her twice. She is just a friend, as I said. I hardly know her, man,' I reply

'So this it, call her and talk to her, know her more,' Viku replies.

'But what am I suppose to talk to her?'

'The hell we know?' Speaks Sam.

'I completely agree with viku, It seems you haven't moved on from Ayushi yet,' adds Sam.

'Nope, there's nothing like that. I have completely moved on. Now give me my cell back,' I shout.

'Fine, if you have, prove it,' speaks Viku.

'Yeah, prove it then,' joins Sam.

'Fuck it guys, I don't want to call and speak to an unknown girl.'

'leave it, bro, he doesn't value our words,' speaks Sam.

'Yeah, fuck it, leave,' speaks Viku.

And both make that emotional blackmailing faces, which I always find difficult to resist.

I get up on my feet and drop myself on the bonnet of the car, 'Fine! But no noise, clear?'

'Ummah. Now call her,' speaks Sam giving me that awful kiss.

'GET OFF ME,' I wear him off.

So I dial her number and call her.

'Put it on the speaker,' asks Viku.

The phone didn't ring and showed switched off...

I try again, yet it consistently shows the same.

'Well...Well. I guess someone's been fooled, I think,' speaks Viku.

'No, I have not. She might be travelling,' I speak.

'Yeah, we can assume that,' replies Sam.

'Assume? I am sure of it,' I reply.

'well, I can see that,' replies Viku.

'Leave off dude, chill. Look at the time, we are getting late, else again I have to listen to those terribly boring lectures of my parents. Come on, let's go, Get in the car,' speaks Sam.

So we leave the place and traverse back home. Yet somewhere, that thing got stuck in mind, did she really fool me?