



can
we be
strangers
again?

SHRIJEET SHANDILYA

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INDIA • SINGAPORE • MALAYSIA



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To Tam, the calm in my storms.

To Avantika, the mirror that showed me my worth.

And to you, dear reader,
may you lose yourself in these pages
only to find a piece of your soul waiting at the
end.

A NEW BEGINNING IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

On a rainy day in Goa, I was sitting in the balcony, admiring the raindrops. The air was thick, heavy with the scent of wet soil, and I felt an odd calmness settle over me. I lit a cigarette, the tip glowing warm orange against the grey backdrop.

The rain had a way of washing everything clean, but today, it only seemed to stir up what I'd tried to bury.

Suddenly I feel a vibration in my pocket. I thought to myself it would be just another college related message. But something in my heart was telling me to check the notification. And there it was, my heart skipped a beat as I read the message. "**Can we be strangers again?**"

I felt a familiar ache, like an old wound reopening. I sighed, slipping the phone back into my pocket, and found myself lost in thoughts of my past—a time filled with extreme emotions of ecstasy and doubt.

Every small detail about my past, be it the lows or the highs reminded me of her, the girl who touched my heart deeply. Her presence was a mix of happiness and heartache, and even though it left a scar, it was beautiful in its own painful way.

“She helped shape the person I am today,” I thought, feeling a strange blend of nostalgia and longing.

The rain drummed steadily, like a familiar rhythm underscoring the quiet echoes of my memories. I smiled a little, remembering how we would laugh at the simplest things, how she lit up even the darkest of my days. But just as swiftly, the sadness crept back in—bringing with it the memory of the day everything changed, the day I learned that some moments leave scars that never fade.

It all began in 2020, a year that seemed to set the stage for countless changes and new chapters in my life. Little did I know then that the year would transform everything, shaping me in ways I could never have imagined.

Now, looking back from 2024, I see how those moments from 2020 laid the foundation for everything that followed.

Let's dive into 2020, back to where it all began.

It was the year I was very excited to start college at Christ University. It felt like a big achievement—it's one of the top commerce colleges in India! I had always imagined walking into this lively campus and meeting new friends.

But then, Covid happened, and everything changed.

Instead of stepping into a bustling campus, I found myself at home, staring at a computer screen. The pandemic meant I was part of the “COVID batch,” which also meant starting college from my room. On the first

day, I sat at my desk, waiting for my online class to start. It wasn't exactly the college experience I had imagined—no crowded lecture halls, no excited chatter. Just me, and a screen filled with tiny faces.

It felt strange and a bit lonely. I missed the energy of a real classroom and the chance to meet people in person. Now, I had to make friends online and learn through a webcam, which was a new and challenging task.

To break the ice between the new students, the college set up a WhatsApp group for all the new students. I watched as the group filled up with numbers and short introductions. Akinchan, a guy from Ghaziabad, took the initiative to start a conversation. "Hey everyone!" he typed, introducing himself and asking questions about people's interests and backgrounds. His enthusiasm and willingness to engage made a difference, and slowly, the group started to warm up. But not everyone was responsive. Some people read the messages but didn't reply.

Even though it was a slow start, I held onto the hope that once offline classes began, we would all finally have the chance to connect in person. I looked forward to meeting everyone, building real relationships, even if it took time.

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THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST UNIVERSITY

As I settled into my new routine, the excitement of starting at Christ University was tinged with a touch of nervousness.

When we had our first official introduction, the virtual setting somehow felt special. As I logged in and my screen filled with the faces of fellow students, we were greeted by Dr. (Fr.) Jossy P. George, the university director. His presence, a blend of warmth and authority, stood out amidst the usual Webex monotony.

With a warm smile and a rich, husky voice, He said, ‘Good morning, Christites.’ His greeting carried a deep sense of pride and belonging. ‘I know this year is different, but

once a Christite, always a Christite. The spirit of Christ is in our blood.'

Eventually, we were introduced to the Christ anthem. The anthem, with its stirring lyrics and powerful melody, prominently featured the call to "March on, Christites." Even through the virtual setting, hearing those words gave us goosebumps. The anthem was a reminder of our unity and purpose, stirring a deep sense of pride and connection.

As we embraced the university's traditions and values, it became clear that being a Christite was more than just attending a college; it was about carrying a piece of your alma mater with you, no matter where we were or how things changed.



THE FIRST CLASS AND THE UNEXPECTED TASK

The day of our first class had finally arrived, and a buzz of excitement filled the virtual space. As we logged into Webex, a mix of nervousness and anticipation swirled within me. And then, she appeared on our screens—Manjari Ma'am.

“Good morning, students!” she said with her warm voice, it literally felt like a hug for a second.

Well, all I can say is that most of the boys in the class were already flattered.

“Alright, let’s get into today’s problem” Manjari Ma’am exclaimed, as she maneuvered through her slides.

I groaned inwardly but it was high time I

faced my fear of Mathematics.

Mayur, sitting next to me in the virtual room, was also clearly struggling. “I don’t get this at all,” he typed in the chat. “Is it just me?”

“Nope, I’m lost too,” Akinchan replied. “But let’s hang in there. She’s supposed to be good.”

Just as we were getting wrapped up in the numbers, Manjari Ma’am dropped a surprise. “By the way,” she said casually, “I’m married and have a child.”

The revelation hit us like a sudden downpour, dousing our daydreams. The room fell into a stunned silence, and the fantasy we had built around her came crashing down. It was a sobering moment, realizing that the person we admired so much had a full, happy life outside the confines of our virtual classroom.

But Manjari Ma’am didn’t let us linger in the shock for long. “To lift the mood,” she said with a smile, “We’re going to have a fun project. I need you to collect photos of every

student, create a collage, and post it on Instagram. The class with the most likes will win a prize.”

The change in energy was instant. “That sounds cool!” Saurabh typed enthusiastically. “Lessgooo!”

“Hell Yeah!” I quickly typed, raising my hand on the Webex platform. Soon others joined in too.

“Great! I’ll send out the details soon,” Manjari Ma’am replied. “Looking forward to seeing your creative collages!”

As we started planning the project, the initial disappointment melted away. The photo collage task became our new focus, and the excitement of collaborating on something fun brought us closer together. It was a chance to turn our day around and make something enjoyable out of it.

The project was more than just a task; it was a way to bond and work together. And as we dove into it, the mood lightened, and the sense of camaraderie grew stronger.

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THE MYSTERY OF THE PURPLE SAREE

The collage project was in full swing. A group of five volunteers—Pavni, Saurabh, Mayur, Akinchan, and I—had created a separate WhatsApp group to manage the task. I was responsible for collecting photos from ten students. It was a challenge, especially since I had never met these people in person and only had their numbers.

“Hey everyone,” I typed into the group chat, “I’m collecting photos for the collage. Could you please send yours by today?”

Most people responded quickly. Messages flew back and forth, and the collage started to take shape. But as the hours ticked by, I noticed that photos from one student were still missing.

Determined to track this person down, I sent a message to the number: “Hi! Can you please share your photo for the collage? Thanks!”

The reply came almost instantly: “Hey Dev, give me a minute. I’m sending it to you now.”

A few moments later, a photo popped up on my screen. I stared at it, captivated. The girl in the picture was wearing a breathtaking purple saree. It was clear this was a special occasion—probably a farewell from her class 12th. Her curly hair framed her face beautifully, and her eyes were deep and mesmerizing. The saree added a touch of traditional grace, and her whole demeanor spoke of elegance and poise.

I was about to type a thank-you when I noticed a new message: “Hi, I’m Avantika. Sorry for the delay. How’s the collage coming up?”

“Hi Avantika! The collage is coming together well. Thank you so much for sending your photo. It’s beautiful!” I replied, feeling a

strange but comforting connection through the screen.

As I looked at her photo again, I felt a strange, unplaceable emotion. The grace and warmth she exuded seemed almost unreal. Her image added a touch of real charm to my otherwise dull online world. Even through the screen, she made the collage project feel more meaningful and gave me a glimpse into the diverse experiences each student brought to Christ University.

“Are you excited for college to start?” I asked, trying to bridge the gap between our digital interaction and the real world we were both missing.

“Definitely! It’s strange starting this way, but I’m looking forward to meeting everyone in person someday,” Avantika responded.

Her words echoed my own feelings. Even though we hadn’t met face-to-face, her photo and our brief conversation made the experience feel a bit more personal and real.

Sitting in the balcony on that rainy day in

Goa, I smiled as I thought about how each photo and each conversation was a step toward building something meaningful. I felt a bittersweet longing for the moments I was missing and the connections I was just beginning to understand. It reminded me that while technology had brought us closer in some ways, it had also kept us apart. The journey was unusual, but it was full of unexpected beauty and connection.

As the writer Anaïs Nin once said, “**We do not see things as they are, we see them as we are.**”



THE DEFENDERS AND THE UNEXPECTED TWIST

Avantika was different. The only one from a science stream in our class of commerce students. And, naturally, that didn't go unnoticed.

One day in our WhatsApp group, Saurabh, the joker, couldn't help himself.

"Science student in a commerce college? Lost on the way to IIT, Avantika?" he typed, adding a row of laughing emojis.

I saw the message and waited. This was going to be interesting.

Avantika fired back almost immediately, "Better lost and learning than stuck in one place forever!" I could feel the bite in her words, even through the screen.

Saurabh, never one to miss a beat, replied, “Right, because balance sheets are sooo adventurous!”

But before I could chuckle, a new player entered the game. Manvit, a guy I hadn’t even noticed before, suddenly chimed in.

“Chill, Saurabh,” he typed. “It’s not cool to judge someone for their choices. We’re all here to learn, aren’t we?”

Whoa. Where did that come from?

Saurabh, caught off guard, quickly replied, “Hey, man, just kidding around.”

But Manvit wasn’t having it. “Yeah, well, keep it friendly,” he shot back.

The group chat was buzzing with all sorts of reactions—thumbs-ups, laughing emojis, even a few popcorn GIFs. I was glued to my screen, wondering what was going to happen next.

Avantika finally broke the tension. “Thanks, Manvit, but I’ve got this.”

Manvit responded, “I know. Just didn’t

like the vibe.”

And that was it. A simple exchange, but it left me scratching my head. Did they know each other? Was this just random? The guy defending her like he was in some courtroom drama? It felt... unexpected.

In the days that followed, I noticed them chatting more. A comment here, a reply there. I kept telling myself I'd find the right moment to jump in, maybe even ask if they knew each other. But I never did. I kept watching from the sidelines, a spectator in my own story.

And maybe that was my biggest mistake.

Suddenly, my phone buzzed, and RKD's (Rahil) name flashed on the screen. I opened the message to find: “Hey, I got into Christ!”

I stared, astonished. RKD, my best friend, known for his unusual crushes on women who were at least fifteen years older than him, was joining me at Christ.

With two people leaving, he had managed to get in. It felt like a sitcom moment: the guy who was always falling for teachers was finally

getting his wish. I could already picture the next three years: endless debates about who was “hot” and who wasn’t, punctuated by RKD’s classic lines about “mature” ladies.

Laughing at the absurdity, I thought, “If this doesn’t make for a wild ride, I don’t know what will!”

It’s six in the evening, and I’m down to the last few puffs of my cigarette and I was torn between diving into the mounting pile of assignments or losing myself in memories.

Just then, Manav called. ‘Hey, let’s step out. It’s a beautiful evening. How about a break?’

Manav is a unique character. His thoughts are so original that he’s the only person I’ve met who goes to bed at exactly 11 PM, as if his life depended on it. A friend from my B-school days at IIM GOA, he’s also a Christite, though a year ahead of me. A big-time procrastinator but guy had the discipline of a monk, quite contradictory, isn’t it?

The invitation felt like a lifeline. I grabbed

my jacket and headed out. As I left the balcony where I'd been lost deep in my thoughts, I realized how much has changed since those online days. Though life has moved on, the memories from that time still bring jolts in my heart, bringing both smiles and tears. Sometimes, the past feels like a comforting friend, reminding me of how we've all grown.

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SCOOTY RIDES AND UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTERS

I went out with Manav on his so-called scooty, which, to be honest, was barely holding itself together.

“Manav, I’m telling you, if this scooty breaks down one more time, we’re gonna have to start walking,

“Ah, come on! It’s not about the ride, it’s about the adventure!” Manav replied, grinning from ear to ear.

Soon I realized that I had forgotten my college ID and almost panicked but then remembered: senior privileges. I flashed my most charming smile at the guard bhaiya and said, “Bhaiya, bas 5-minute mein aa raha

hoogn.” He waved us through with a knowing smile.

As we stopped for tea and a cigarette, Manav and I delved into our usual deep, philosophical conversation. It was mostly about how IIM GOA seemed like it was auditioning for the role of “Worst Managed B-School” while still being one of the best in the country. I said, “Yaar, is college ka tagline change krke “Where learning never stops” se change karke “where learning happens ho jana chahiye,” and Manav bursted out laughing.

Our conversation drifted from IIM Goa quirks to the universal truth about cigarettes: “A cigarette is a temporary escape from reality, but also a reminder of your lack of control.” We shared a laugh about how sometimes a cigarette feels like the best friend who’s always there for you—even if it’s not the healthiest relationship.

To balance the ill-effects of my smoking and also to fuel my passion, we headed to the badminton court. I used to be pretty good at

badminton—or at least, I liked to think so. The game was my escape, my way of feeling alive and competitive. But then cigarettes crept into my life, and my footwork became less about finesse and more about fumbling with a smoke in one hand. It was as if I'd traded in my shuttlecock for a pack of "cancer sticks," as my friends liked to call them.

I noticed a girl standing by the badminton court. At first glance, she looked oddly familiar — curly hair, pink T-shirt, black trousers, and pink shoes. "Is this *déjà vu*, or am I just seeing a ghost from the past?" I thought to myself.

She seemed to be waiting for her friends, and I couldn't help but wonder, The girl is clearly obsessed with pink.

I approached her and said, "Excuse me, are you waiting to play? Want to join us?"

She turned around, and I froze for a second. As I noticed her big, expressive eyes and her broad, gentle face. She reminded me so much of Avantika. Her curly hair framed her face in a way that added to her charm,

bouncing with every movement as if it had a life of its own. There was something captivating about her, a quality that went beyond mere physical appearance. She had a smile that could light up a room, and her presence felt like a breath of fresh air.

“Yes, I’d love to join,” she said with a bright smile. She introduced herself as Arushi, and we started our match. Arushi was a decent player, and we managed to win the game. Even though my footwork was a bit rusty—thanks to a few too many cigarettes—I enjoyed the game.

After the match, we chatted casually. Her warm smile and the sparkle in her eyes made every word feel genuine, and I found myself appreciating the simple pleasure of her company. I realised that we had a lot in common,

It was feeling like an old wine in a new glass. I couldn’t help but recall that Avantika’s dad had also been with Punjab National Bank. Arushi’s resemblance to Avantika was uncanny

—her big eyes, broadhead, and even her smile. It was as if the universe was serving me a familiar vintage under a different label.

We continued chatting, and I learned that Arushi was new to the college scene. I gave her some friendly advice. “Look, the secret to surviving college is simple: just act like you’ve got it all together while you’re secretly Googling everything. Works like a charm!”

Arushi chuckled, “I’ll keep that in mind. So, basically, fake it ‘til you make it?”

“Exactly!” I replied, laughing. “It’s a timeless strategy. Works in college, and apparently, in life too.”

After exchanging contact details with Arushi, she left the court with a smile, and I found myself lingering there, staring at my phone screen. A strange mix of excitement and unease swept over me. I scrolled through WhatsApp, and there it was again, the message I couldn’t escape: **“Can we be strangers again?”** It had come 5 hours ago.

My heart ached again, and a familiar sense

of dread settled in. The person who had sent this message was someone I'd known for four years. Four years of shared memories, of laughter, of late-night confessions, of everything and nothing. And now, that person wanted to undo it all, to go back to square one, as if none of it had ever happened.

Was this my fault? Did I miss a sign? Was there something I could have done differently? My mind was in a loop of ‘what ifs’ and regrets.

I couldn't help but wonder, “Should I say sorry? But what for? What did I even do? I had invested everything, every little bit of myself.

I was lost in the whirlwind of my thoughts when Manav interrupted and told me, “Let's go”

“Everything okay?” he asked, realizing something was not okay with me.

I managed a weak smile. “Yeah, just dealing with some stuff.”

He nodded, sensing that I wasn't ready to talk about it. “Alright, man. Let's get out of

here. I need to head back to my room anyway.”

Walking back with Manav, I couldn’t shake the feeling that the universe had a funny way of sending reminders of the past. Whether it was Arushi’s resemblance to Avantika or the shared experiences that connected us all, life had a way of making old memories resurface in unexpected ways.

Manav, sensing my reflective mood, quipped, “Yaar, jo bhi he, Itna deep mat soch.”

And, of course, this is exactly why I sometimes have a grudge against people whose names start with M.

I couldn’t help but think, “Sharing your emotions with a guy is like trying to explain the plot of *Inception* to a three-year-old—confusing, messy, and mostly leaves everyone frustrated. That’s why every guy needs a female friend. They’re the ones who can actually decode our emotional state and help us sort the mess without making us feel like we’re just flailing around in the dark.”

We had just come back to our room—our

“cluster,” to be precise. One of the few perks of doing an MBA at IIM Goa was getting to choose who lived next door or across the hall.

Being in the second year, we were supposed to have some privileges—or so they claimed. Our cluster was made up of four guys: Priyam, Abhay, Manav, and I. Nothing particularly glamorous about it—just four survivors in this B-school jungle, where every day felt like an unscripted episode of a reality show that none of us had auditioned for.

I laughed in my mind; The cluster system was a mixed blessing. On one hand, we got to choose our neighbours, which meant we could avoid living next to the overzealous kids who were always ready to recite Porter’s Five Forces at 3 a.m. On the other hand, we had... well, us.

Tonight was one of those nights when there wasn’t much to do, aside from stressing about a case study due in less than 24 hours. So, naturally, we finished off a bottle of Old Monk. “Goa is a drinker’s paradise,” I proclaimed, holding up the empty bottle like

I'd just won a trophy. "250 bucks for this magic potion? Forget ROI; we've got rum!"

Manav, sprawled across his bed, grinned. "Forget the fees, man. The real ROI of an MBA in Goa is the cheap booze and sunsets."

He turned to me with that familiar look, the one that said, 'Give me something good.' "So, what's next?" he asked, probably expecting me to unveil some grand plan.

I shrugged, "Next? Just get placed. That's the plan. Keep whining till we get a job offer decent enough to explain to our parents why we paid 20 lakhs. I mean, I got in here with a solid 91.10 percentile. And for what? Did all that just to be in this MBA circus where we're mastering the fine art of making PowerPoints look like strategic masterpieces.

He nodded, "Or at least hoping the placement office has enough feni to get us through the madness of Day Zero."

I replied, "Or at least hoping that the companies that come here don't ask too many questions beyond 'Tell me about yourself'—

because we're all running out of creative answers for that one. **And besides**, who needs originality when you've got ChatGPT to copy-paste your way through?"

He chuckled. "True. And let's be honest, we're all here just pretending to learn the secrets of management while really just figuring out how to live on caffeine, cheap liquor, and instant noodles."

We both burst into laughter, knowing full well that was the mantra of every MBA student on this campus.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. I groaned inwardly, already anticipating the corporate smile and pleasantries I'd have to muster up. Who could it be now? Another MBA soldier probably looking for some sort of alliance or just a place to crash. I opened the door, prepared for the usual pleasantries, but was relaxed to see that it was Priyam.

I thought, "Oh, it's him. Guy doesn't drink, doesn't smoke—sometimes I wonder, '**Yeh banda oxygen waste kyun kar raha hai?**'"

“Party chal rahi hai kya?” Priyam asked enthusiastically, though it was clear he wasn’t here for the booze.

Manav looked up, barely containing his laughter. “Nahi yaar, mujra chal raha hai! Aaja dance karle!” he said, playfully mocking the excitement of college parties.

Priyam, who was also in our cluster and a fellow Christite (yes, we had three of us in the same cluster, quite the coincidence), had this knack for bringing the most random energy into our otherwise mundane lives. Despite the fact that our batches were different and I joined Christ University just as Priyam was getting his graduation degree, it was clear that he was still the life of the cluster.

“Wese bhi Dev ko dekh ke toh lagta hai mujra hi chal raha hoga!”, Priyam mocked me.

I thought to myself, “Yeh zinda kyun hai?”

I turned to him and said, “Bro, I passed out in 2023 and joined this jail—sorry, I mean MBA—in 2023.

But despite the playful banter and his

seemingly endless energy, Priyam's presence was a reminder that even in the chaos of MBA life, there were moments of camaraderie and absurdity that made it all worthwhile.

Eventually, we all crashed for the night, each of us went back into our rooms with a mix of useless gossip and half-hearted attempts at sleep. As I drifted off, I glanced at the clock—it was already 5:10 a.m.

But as soon as I closed my eyes, that message popped back into my mind. Although I was half-drunk, I couldn't shake the thought of it.

"It takes the consent of two to build a relationship, but only one's decision to shatter it," the quote echoed painfully in my mind, hitting me like a sledgehammer.

I set ten alarms, hoping to wake up on time. The plan was ambitious: 7:15, 7:20, 7:25, and so on. I figured that if I set enough alarms, I might actually wake up. If not, at least my room would have a symphony of blaring tones to kickstart the day—whether I wanted it or

not.

I woke up around 8:25 a.m., feeling the full impact of a hangover, rushing to brush my teeth and get myself prepared for a lecture. I always wondered why teachers were so obsessed with 9 a.m. classes. As I hurriedly got ready, I saw Priyam lounging in the common area.

“Yaar, Priyam, iss prof. ko bol yaar, 9 baje kon lecture rakhta hai?” I complained.

As we both rushed through our morning routine, it was clear that in the world of MBA life, some things were just too absurd to make sense.

I was barely functioning, having dragged myself into class all hungover. As usual, we managed to claim the last seats in Paddy Sir’s lecture.

Paddy Sir’s lecture had a soothing quality to it, with his voice carrying a gentle rhythm that created a dangerously calming atmosphere. It felt as if his tone was designed to encourage relaxation rather than alertness,

making it all too easy to doze off.

As we settled in, the first repeated question of the day came up, one I had heard in almost every lecture over the past 22 sessions. “Had your breakfast? What was today’s menu?”

Priyam, brimming with energy despite the early hour, eagerly answered. “Yes, sir! Full of energy,” he said, “It was aloo paratha!”

I looked at Priyam with a mix of admiration and confusion. How did he manage to look so vibrant after barely any sleep and a breakfast that, while classic, seemed unlikely to fuel such boundless energy?

Meanwhile, as Sir continued with his smoothly delivered lecture, it was clear that his calming presence was more likely to encourage drowsiness than to keep me awake and engaged.

Suddenly, my phone buzzed. It was a call from Mahesh Sir, a professor from Christ University. It had been over a year since we last spoke, so I was puzzled by the call.

However, taking the call in the middle of Sir's lecture wasn't an option. I decided to wait until the lecture ended, planning to call Mahesh Sir back after the class.

The lecture dragged on, and I anxiously checked the clock. Finally, at 10:15, the lecture wrapped up, and I made a beeline for the exit. My mind was already set on having the same breakfast Priyam had enjoyed—something hearty to revive me from this morning's struggle.

I finally had my breakfast, and the remnants of my hangover were beginning to fade. As I settled into a more alert state, I remembered that I needed to call Mahesh Sir back.

When I dialed his number, he greeted me with his usual warmth. "Good morning, Mr. Dixit!"

I reciprocated the greeting with the same enthusiasm, "Good morning, Sir!"

He asked how everything was going, to which I replied, "It's good, Sir. Everything's

going well.”

Mahesh Sir quickly got to the point. “We’re planning an alumni meetup in January, and I wanted to see if you could schedule your plans around that. Your presence would be much appreciated.”

I smiled and assured him, “Of course, Sir. I’ll be there.”

After ending the call, I felt a sense of relief and satisfaction, knowing I had taken care of this important task.

I had only one lecture for the day, so I scurried back to my room for a much-needed 6-hour nap, hoping to catch up on some lost sleep. As I was settling in, my phone buzzed with a text from Pavni.

“Are you planning to come?” She asked. “I hope Mahesh Sir called you. At least he thinks I’m important to Christ!”

Just then, my phone rang. It was Pavni. “Hey, did you get the call too?” she asked.

“Yep, he did. I guess we’re the special ones now. I told her I’d be there—mostly because I

want to show off how well I can pretend to be a responsible adult.”

“Definitely. I’m pretty sure Mahesh Sir sees us as some kind of ‘legendary alumni’—you know, the ones who survive on caffeine and good intentions.”

We both laughed, knowing that in the end, our importance might be exaggerated, but at least we had a good story to tell.

After the call with Pavni, I lit up a cigarette and checked my phone. Opening WhatsApp, I saw the message still waiting for a reply—a glaring reminder of the emotional turmoil I had been trying to escape for the past day.

Each time I saw the message, it was like a persistent nudge, forcing me to confront the whirlwind of emotions I had been dodging.

With a heavy heart and tears threatening to spill, I typed out my response: **“If being strangers is what you need to find your happiness, then I’ll step back. I just want you to be at peace, even if it means losing a part of myself.”**

I hit send and looked at her name saved in my phone—Tam. I had always called her that, a tender nickname that felt like a secret between us, a small piece of affection that meant the world to me.

The cigarette in my hand provided a brief calm, a momentary escape from the chaos swirling in my mind. But even as I took a drag, the thoughts persisted, relentless and unyielding.

Each puff seemed to draw me closer to her memories, the times when everything felt simpler, yet infinitely more complicated. I murmured to myself, “I hope we never meet again.”

I found myself pondering whether she was my second biggest mistake or merely a fleeting happiness in the grand scheme of life. The weight of the memories was heavy, and I couldn’t help but reflect on the times I had left behind.

Amidst this sea of reflection, I remembered that I was nursing a hangover

and desperately needed a six-hour nap. Yet, sleep seemed impossible as my mind was tangled in swirling memories and unresolved feelings. Even though I was exhausted, I couldn't escape the flood of thoughts dragging me back to the past. I took one last drag from the cigarette, flicked it away, and braced myself to dive back into the story. The haze of the past days slowly cleared, and I found myself drawn to the moments I had left behind.

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NEW FACES AND UNSEEN CONNECTIONS

With a deep breath, I exhaled. I was ready to reconnect the dots, to pick up where I had left, and to understand the path that had led me here.

Thinking about it made me chuckle, especially when I remembered our online classes. Despite our best efforts to look engaged, the reality was far from different. Our webcams were always on, creating the illusion of attentiveness, but our WhatsApp group was a flurry of jokes, memes, and random chatter. The disparity between our polished Zoom appearances and our actual interest levels was contradictory.

One day, during a particularly monotonous lecture, I noticed a new face on the Webex

screen—a girl who I'd never seen before in any of our previous classes. I thought to myself, “Who's this? Did she just crash our class, or is she part of some secret club of elusive students?”

Maybe she was a latecomer. The more intriguing detail, though, was the empty seat next to her. It made me wonder if she was there to occupy the final vacant spot left by two students who had left Christ, with Rahil filling one seat and this girl possibly the last one. Maybe she was the final piece in our virtual seating puzzle!

Our unofficial chat was quickly filled with messages like, “Who is she?” and “Has anyone seen her before?” No one had an answer, so I took a closer look at the screen.

Without missing a beat, I typed in the chat, “I guess her name is Tanishka.”

In the end, the real lesson of the online class wasn't about the course material—it was about keeping track of who was who, even when the lecture seemed to blur into the

background of our ever-expanding digital social life.

I made some online friends, Pavni and Saurabh, who were like a breath of fresh air in my otherwise dull digital world. Pavni was always bubbling with ideas for extracurricular activities, dragging us into all sorts of virtual fests and events. Saurabh was our go-to guy for navigating Manri Ma'am's tricky lectures—our half-hour crush who somehow made those boring sessions a bit more bearable.

Even though I really wanted to join in on these fun activities with Avantika, I never had the courage to say "Hi" or ask her to join. I kept thinking that she and Manvit must have some kind of chemistry, and I didn't want to be the awkward third wheel, the "kabab mein haddi." So, I stayed in the background, imagining how different things could have been if I'd had the nerve to reach out.

A few days later, I realized that everyone seemed to be finding their own romantic connections. Pavni, with her usual flair,

dropped the bombshell that she'd received a proposal. Saurabh and I were left staring at her on the GMeet screen, our faces a perfect blend of shock and confusion.

"Seriously?" I thought, feeling a mix of envy and amusement. "Online love? How does that even work? Here I am, struggling to find the courage to say 'Hi' to Avantika."

Pavni mentioned she hadn't accepted the proposal yet, which only added to the whirlwind of emotions I was navigating. It felt like everyone was on a quest to find their soulmate or at least a hookup buddy for the next three years, while I was still fumbling in the background. It was both funny and cringe, seeing everyone else getting into relationships while I was still trying to figure out how to talk to Avantika.



BIRTHDAY SURPRISES AND UNSPOKEN WISHES

As the days turned into weeks, the monotony of online classes, assignments, and endless Google Meets began to fade into a routine. The once-novel experience of virtual learning had become a regular part of life, with Saurabh, Pavni and I, finding solace in our digital gatherings. These meetings were our sanctuary—a place where we could momentarily escape the pressures of academia and indulge in laughter, casual banter, and camaraderie.

In the midst of this routine, an intriguing revelation came to light: Saurabh was also navigating the turbulent waters of online romance. Despite his numerous attempts and a string of proposals, he was yet to find a

match. It was both heart-wrenching and strangely amusing to witness his ongoing search for love. Each story of rejection added a layer of shared experience to our group's dynamic, blending melancholy with a touch of humour.

Then, as the calendar pages turned, October approached with its crisp air and vibrant colours, heralding my birthday month.

On October 13th, around 11:55 p.m., I was lying in my bed, mindlessly scrolling through reels on my phone, the usual late-night ritual. Suddenly, a notification popped up on my screen: "Jaldi se ye meeting join kr!" It was from Pavni. I sat up, immediately feeling a rush of excitement and curiosity.

Without wasting a second, I grabbed my laptop and quickly opened it, my fingers almost fumbling over the keys. As the clock struck midnight, I joined the Google Meet, and the atmosphere was electric. Pavni and Saurabh had arranged a Google Meet to celebrate my birthday, about 10-12 classmates

were already there, their faces popping up on the screen one by one. Complimented by a heartwarming video of mine. The video was a testament to our journey together, capturing our shared moments, inside jokes, and the quirky incidents that had marked our time.

Others chimed in with their wishes too—laughing, joking, and making the virtual room feel a little warmer. Despite all the noise and chatter, my eyes kept darting to the participants list, waiting for one particular name to appear.

Noticing my distraction, Pavni nudged me with a sly smile. “You’re waiting for her, aren’t you?”

I shrugged, trying to play it cool. “Maybe...”

Saurabh chuckled and said, “Do you want me to give Avantika a call?”

Before I could respond, Pavni, ever the bold and proactive friend, interjected. “Don’t even think about it,” she said with a hint of a smile. “If you ask, she might never show up.

Pavni grabbed her phone with a determined look. “Don’t worry, I’ll handle this,” she declared, scrolling through her contacts. “If anyone can convince her, it’s me.”

She dialed Avantika’s number, glancing over at me with a wink. “Let’s see if she picks up,” she whispered, as I held my breath, waiting to see if she’d join the celebration.

Pavni’s call rang only for a moment before Avantika picked up. I watched her closely, unable to hear Avantika’s voice on the other end, but I could see Pavni her mic was unmuted.

“Hey, Avantika! It’s Dev’s birthday today,” she said, grinning wide enough to stretch across the screen. “We’ve set up a Google Meet to celebrate. Do you want to join us?”

I sat there, my eyes fixed on Pavni’s face, trying to read every little reaction. I had no idea what Avantika was saying, but I was hanging on to every second, my mind racing with the possibilities. I hadn’t ever talked to her properly, hadn’t even seen her beyond her

profile picture. Still, there was this strange pull, a flutter of hope that she might just say yes.

Pavni hung up the call, flashing a quick, triumphant smile in my direction. My heart was racing, my palms suddenly a bit sweaty. She was coming. Avantika was actually joining the call.

I felt a rush of happiness, an involuntary grin stretching across my face. My heart skipped a beat. I didn't know why it mattered so much or why I was this excited, but it did. And I couldn't help but feel that maybe, just maybe, something special was about to happen.

Just two minutes later, a notification popped up on the screen: "Avantika Sharma has joined the call." My heart skipped a beat. There she was, in real-time, right in front of me.

"Happy Birthday, Dev!" she said with a warm smile.

I felt my face heat up as I replied, "Thank

you,” trying to sound casual, but I could sense the awkwardness in my own voice.

Almost immediately, the teasing began. Akinchan grinned and said, “Ahh, din ban gaya bhai ka!” Everyone else burst into laughter, throwing in playful remarks that made no sense to Avantika.

Avantika looked around, a bit puzzled, trying to figure out what was going on. She smiled politely but it was clear she had no idea why everyone seemed so delighted, why all eyes were darting between her and me. The whole call knew—or thought they knew—about my so-called “crush.” Maybe it was just an infatuation, but whatever it was, it had become the worst-kept secret among my friends.

As the clock ticked towards 1 a.m., the Google Meet session continued with some fun chat. Chirag, one of our classmates, even got in on the action, mimicking Monika Ma’am’s distinctive tone as we pretended to roast her in good humour. The room filled with laughter

as everyone enjoyed the light-hearted moment.

Soon after, the everyone began to leave as well, each one wishing me a happy birthday once more before exiting the call.

Eventually, the list of attendees was reduced to just a few. Avantika was still there, but I couldn't muster the courage to make eye contact. I focused on the quiet screen, savouring the birthday cheer as everyone finally signed off, leaving me alone with the echoes of the night's celebration.

After the meeting ended, I picked up my phone and headed to bed. I glanced at the notifications, The BCOM-B Unofficial group chat was overflowing with "Happy Birthday Dev" messages. It seemed like every member had chimed in, adding their own touch to the birthday wishes.

Scrolling through WhatsApp, I saw countless birthday messages from school friends, many of which seemed like mere continuations of previous conversations,

almost as if they were just following the trend of birthday greetings. It felt like a routine yearly exchange, with everyone sending their obligatory wishes.

Among the notifications, I noticed one from an unknown number. Curiosity piqued; I opened the chat to find a birthday wish from someone I didn't recognize.

A mix of confusion and intrigue washed over me. Who could this be? I wondered, trying to figure out the mystery behind the anonymous birthday wish.

I replied with a simple “Thank you.”

I then typed out another message: “Do we know each other?”

Suddenly, a reply popped up. “No, we don’t know each other,” came the response. “Hi, I’m Tanishka.”

I remembered her as the last person to join our class—the one who had appeared out of nowhere, in our boring Webex meeting.

We had a brief conversation about how the classes were evolving and how she was new to

such a setup especially as she joined in late.

Anyway, I heard that the Karnataka government approved hybrid learning, so we'll be there in December.", I said.

She replied, "Yeah, I've heard that too. Online classes feel more like a background soundtrack while we scroll through memes and pretend to be engaged."

I smiled and thought, "Yeah, that's pretty much what I do too."

I replied, "Yeah, you're right."

Our conversation continued briefly about college assignments, but soon we wrapped up. I said, "Same here, Tanishka. It was really nice talking with you. Let's keep in touch and help each other out."

We wrapped up the conversation with a friendly "Bye!" and a wave emoji.

I suddenly noticed that the cigarette was almost gone, just the bud between my fingers.

It was that iconic conversation that dragged me into a storm I never saw coming. A

storm that still raged inside me, pulling me apart, leaving me stranded somewhere between what was and what could have been ***"If only that birthday wish had never come... if I had never opened that message,"*** I murmured to myself, as if wishing could undo the past.

But regret never changes the past; it only makes the present harder to bear. And in that moment, all I wanted was to forget... to unfeel. But how do you unfeel something that still feels so deeply?

I stared out at the fading daylight through the window, feeling the pull of the night ahead. The noise of the world seemed far away, and I was alone again with my thoughts.

Suddenly, I heard the all-too-familiar ding from my phone—the Microsoft Outlook notification that every MBA student has come to despise. Honestly, who actually likes that sound? It's like they designed it specifically to disturb whatever tiny shred of calm we have left.

I picked up my phone, squinting through the headache, and saw an email: “*Pre-Placement Talk scheduled at 2 PM for students without classes today.*” Great. Just what I needed—an invitation to sit in a room with a bunch of overly enthusiastic recruiters, nodding like we’re all in sync, pretending to be the “ideal candidate.” Attached to the email was a list of students who were “**fortunate**” enough to be chosen for this delightful event.

With a sigh, I clicked on the Excel file. I typed “Dev” in the search bar. Just once, no need to check further. No one else on this campus has the audacity to share this name with me. And, of course, there it was—highlighted in bright yellow like some kind of prize I’d won. Fantastic.

I groaned. “I don’t want to go. I just want to sleep.” But no, they just had to drag us out for these pre-placement talks, making us parade around in western business formals with clean-shaven faces. Seriously, who even made that a rule? The thought of it made me grumble, “Beard is the jewellery of men!”

Two hours to go.

“Man, I’m in a hungover... I can’t deal with one more thing today. Paddy sir’s class was enough punishment.”

I flopped back down onto my bed, pulling the blanket over my head like it could shield me from reality. Maybe if I stayed still long enough, the world would forget I existed for just a bit longer.

Man, as much as I wanted to just bury myself under the blanket and pretend this day didn’t exist, the thought of paying a fine—or worse, being debarred from the placement cycle—was enough to make me move.

My dad had taken a loan just to get me here, to see me “placed” in some shiny job with a hefty pay check. Skipping out wasn’t an option.

I dragged myself out of bed, and dug through the chaos that was my wardrobe. After some digging, I found a crisp white shirt that looked presentable and a pair of trousers and then I found my black blazer that I hoped

could still pass as “western business formal.”

Then came the part that I dreaded most—my beard. I went to the washroom and stared at my reflection in the mirror, admiring my beard.....The beard looked good, like it always did, adding a bit of edge to my face. It was full and perfectly shaped, the kind of beard that made you look like a rugged adventurer in a suit, rather than someone who just crawled out of bed. “Beard is the jewellery for men,” I grumbled again, trying to convince myself I could get away with just trimming it. But no, clean-shaven was the rule. With a sigh, I grabbed the razor and went to work, shaving off my dignity with every stroke. The hangover was bad enough; now I had to face the world bare-faced too?

With my face feeling unnervingly smooth and the hangover still showing in my eyes, I trudged towards the auditorium. The sun seemed a little too bright, the world a little too loud. By the time I got there, a long line had already formed, snaking down the hall like a never-ending queue for a new iPhone launch. I

stood in line, trying to hide my wince every time someone laughed or spoke too loudly.

Finally, I managed to snag the last seat at the back. Not ideal, but at least I wouldn't have to fake enthusiasm from the front row. Two figures appeared on the stage, fiddling with the mic like they were trying to defuse a bomb. They finally got it working, and one of them leaned in with a bright, overly enthusiastic smile: "Good afternoon, students!"

I rolled my eyes, muttering under my breath, "Good afternoon, my ass..." Their cheery voices boomed through the speakers, making my head throb a little harder. The first guy—with glasses perched on the edge of his nose—launched into a spiel about "opportunities" and "career growth." I could feel my eyelids getting heavier with each word.

The woman with the tight bun and that relentless smile continued, "So, welcome to the pre-placement talk for Globex Corporation. We are a global leader in digital

transformation, committed to driving innovation and excellence in all that we do.”

Oh great, here we go, I thought, already feeling the impending boredom settle over me. She went on, “ Globex Corporation has been recognized as one of the top 50 employees worldwide and has a diverse portfolio that spans from AI and machine learning to cutting-edge fintech solutions. We pride ourselves on our vibrant work culture, our commitment to employee growth, and our innovative spirit.”

Then she added, “the importance of networking and how your connections can shape your career trajectory!”

Networking? My brain scoffed. In this state, I was more likely to network with a pillow than a potential employer. I slumped back into my chair, silently begging the clock to move faster.

My head throbbed with each bullet point they listed. The woman jumped back in, “We provide a competitive salary package,

comprehensive benefits, and continuous learning opportunities. At Globex Corporation, you're not just an employee; you're a valued partner in our journey towards excellence!"

After an hour or so, she said, "Now, we'd like to open the floor to any questions."

Please, no one ask anything. Please, I silently pleaded, feeling the dull ache in my head starting to spike again. I just wanted this to end so I could drag myself back to bed and let this hangover drown in sleep.

But of course, there's always that one overachiever in the crowd. A hand shot up almost instantly—a guy from the front row, glasses perched on his nose, looking like he'd been waiting his whole life for this moment.

"Yes, you," the woman smiled, pointing at him.

"Thank you for the presentation. I was wondering if you could elaborate on how Amtronix plans to integrate ESG principles into its core business model while maintaining

profitability in emerging markets?” he asked, his voice filled with the kind of enthusiasm that made me want to throw my chair at him.

I groaned internally. *ESG? Really? Why do you have to ruin this for the rest of us?* But it didn’t end there. One by one, hands started popping up across the auditorium like whack-a-moles—everyone suddenly had something to ask, from detailed questions about market strategies to inquiries about the company’s long-term vision.

Each answer seemed to drag on for an eternity, my head pounding with every second that ticked by. I kept glancing at the clock, praying for a miracle that would speed things up.

Finally, after what felt like a lifetime, the woman up front said, “Thank you all for your wonderful questions. We hope we’ve been able to provide some clarity on who we are and what we stand for. We look forward to engaging with you further during the recruitment process.”

A polite round of applause followed, but I was already halfway out of my seat, ready to make a dash for the door. I managed to weave my way through the crowd, ignoring the excited chatter around me.

I ran back to my room. Without bothering to change, I collapsed onto the bed. The world felt a little softer now, the headache slightly duller. I let out a long, exhausted sigh, pulling the blanket over my head, and surrendered to the comfort of my pillow.

Finally, peace. The corporate world could wait. For now, all I wanted was sleep.



ECHOES OF WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN

I woke up to find that it was already 8 PM. My stomach growled, reminding me that I hadn't eaten anything since the morning's Aloo Paratha, and even that seemed like a distant memory. I groggily changed out of the dreaded western business formal—finally free from the corporate attire and rushed towards the canteen.

When I arrived, the familiar smell of Chicken Lal Jhol filled the air. My mouth watered instantly. There was a long line of juniors waiting patiently, but I didn't care. *Seniors have their privileges, right?* I thought, cutting the line without hesitation. A few of them looked at me, but I shrugged it off.

I grabbed a plate and asked the guy at the

counter, “Bhaiya, jitna de sakte ho do, bahut bhook lagi hai.” He smiled knowingly, scooping a generous helping of chicken onto my plate. I piled on three or four spoons of rice and made my way to an empty table.

I plugged in my earphones, ready to drown out the day with some music. I opened Spotify, and the first song that played was “Jo Tum Mere Ho” by Anuv Jain. The melody was soft, and the lyrics floated through my ears, “*Pooche yeh tu ki tujhe mein maine kya dekhta hoon, jab chaaron taraf aaj kitne hi saare nazaare hain...*”

The words hit me like a wave, and before I knew it, I found myself opening WhatsApp. My heart sank as I saw the notification—a message from Tam, the person who’d turned my world upside down just days ago. She had replied two hours ago.

“*Live your life; don’t get stuck on me.*”

“*I’m removing you from Instagram and Snapchat. If you ever need anything, just let me know. I’ll always be here for you.*”

Good bye and Good luck for your placement

As I read her words, the ache in my chest deepened. The realization that she was now removing me from her digital world felt like a cold, sharp knife twisting in my heart. The memories of our friendship came flooding back—how she used to share everything with me, from the dress she wore to every little detail of her day. The gossip about Christ, the inside jokes, and the bond we had.

Despite being just, a friend from her perspective, she was my one-sided love. For me, our bond meant everything—I never wanted a relationship from her, only this connection that I hoped would last forever. The memories of our friendship came flooding back—how she used to share everything with me, from the dress she wore to every little detail of her day. The gossip about Christ, the inside jokes, and the bond we had, the person I confided in, the one who made my days brighter.

She was the person who taught me to love someone in moderation, to not be a fool by wasting emotions on someone who

don't care.

Now, seeing her remove me from her life felt like erasing a part of my own soul. The depth of my feelings, once filled with hope and warmth, now lay in ruins.

I read the words again, and they felt like a punch to the gut. I could almost hear her voice saying it, soft but firm, trying to be kind yet distant. It was like she was telling me to let go, to move on, but I wasn't ready to. Not yet. *How could she just...?*

My chest tightened, and for a moment, feeling breathless. My hands trembled slightly as I put the phone down. The music continued to play, the lyrics weaving into the moment, making it harder to hold back. I felt a sting in my eyes, and before I could stop it, a tear slipped down my cheek. I wiped it away quickly, glancing around to make sure no one noticed. But the canteen was too busy; no one was looking.

I closed my eyes, letting the music and the warmth of the chicken in my mouth offer

some small comfort. ***How do you unfeel something that still feels so real?***

I sat there, alone at the empty table, letting the weight of it all wash over me. The words she had typed felt like a finality I wasn't ready for, and yet, I knew I had to face it somehow... **even if it broke me a little more with every passing moment.**

I had been craving the Chicken Lal Jhol all day, my stomach growling in anticipation. The rich, spicy flavors should have been a welcome relief from the haze of my hangover and the emotional storm I was in. But as I took my first few bites, I realized that even this comfort food couldn't soothe me. After only a few spoonful, my appetite disappeared. I felt a peculiar heaviness, as if my heart was too full to appreciate the food in front of me.

The music from Spotify continued to play softly in the background, and the next song was “Besar Rahee Sharabein, Besabar Ye Dil Jo Mera.” The lyrics seemed to speak directly to the turmoil inside me: “*Besar rahee sharabein,*

*besabar ye dil jo mera, bevakoof tha tere bina,
beqaraar si thi raatein, beshumaar teri yaaden.”*

It was as if Spotify had become a silent witness to my heartbreak, echoing the sentiments of loss and yearning that I couldn't escape. The words resonated deeply, amplifying the ache in my chest. Each note felt like a reflection of my feelings, a soundtrack to my sorrow.

I finished my meal and made my way back to my room, each step feeling more urgent than the last. I wanted nothing more than to escape the swirling mess of thoughts and emotions that had been plaguing me all day. As I walked, the night air felt crisp and calming, a gentle contrast to the chaos of my mind.

I finally reached my room, closed the door behind me, and sank into the bed. The comfort of the mattress and the quiet of the room offered a brief solace from the storm.

I lit up a cigarette, letting the smoke curl around me as I tried to escape the chaotic

thoughts that swirled in my mind. With a heavy sigh, I opened Instagram to check if she had really removed me from her life. I clicked on the search button and, as the recent searches popped up, I saw her name: Tanishka. My heart raced as I tapped on it.

The profile loaded, and my eyes fell on the blue “Follow” button. Below it, it showed “Followed by Pavni Arora and 71 others.” My stomach dropped; it seemed like the connections were still there, but I felt a pang of disappointment.

I quickly switched to Snapchat, hoping for some clarity. The first person on my list had been her, but the streak was gone. Still, it showed us as best friends. It was as if the connections were frayed but not entirely severed—a bittersweet reminder of what once was.

The cigarette burned slowly between my fingers, the smoke curling up like the remnants of what we once had. I watched as the ember glowed faintly, a dying reminder of

the warmth that once existed between us. But now, just like this cigarette, that warmth was fading into ash.

I opened WhatsApp again, her chat still sitting there at the top, mocking me with its silence, I stared at the message, feeling anger simmer beneath the surface. Her words, “*Live your life; don’t get stuck on me,*” echoed in my mind. My fingers flew across the screen as I typed out what I truly wanted to say.

“So, you did it again, huh? Walked away like I was nothing, like I didn’t exist. The **promise she made**—“**I won’t leave you again**”—**was broken again**,” Does your ‘goodbye’ make it easier for me to forget, or does it just help you sleep better at night?”

I stopped, my thumb hovering over the ‘send’ button.

But I knew she wouldn’t care. She hadn’t cared when she left before, when she replaced me so easily. She wouldn’t care now. I could send a thousand messages, and it wouldn’t change a thing.

I deleted the message, one letter at a time, until the screen was blank again. Just like me.

I took another drag trying to calm the storm inside me, but it was no use. The pain was too real, too raw. The tears welled up again, and this time, I didn't fight them. They rolled down my cheeks, each one a silent cry for the love I lost, for the promises that had crumbled into nothing.

“Why me?” I whispered into the emptiness. “Why is it always me who ends up hurt?” My voice broke, and I felt my chest tighten, each breath coming in ragged gasps. I had given everything, all I had, every piece of myself to this friendship... to this love. But was this it? Was this what I got in return? Was I just destined to be the one left behind, the one who cared too much, who loved too deeply?

Attachment is a strange thing,

I thought to myself. It latches onto you quietly, seeping into the cracks of your being, until it becomes a part of who you are. But

when it breaks, when it snaps, it takes pieces of you with it, leaving you feeling hollow, empty, incomplete.

I stamped out my cigarette in the ashtray and wiped away my tears and thought about how it seemed like a cruel joke in the face of my anguish. “*You can’t force someone to love you when they don’t want to,*” I whispered to myself, trying to make sense of it all. **Why do people forget those who once mattered to them when new faces come into their lives?**

I couldn’t help but wonder if this was just the way things were meant to be—some people love hard, and some leave easily.

As the silence settled, my mind drifted back to a different time, a different moment—back to 2020. Life then was a blend of hopeful beginnings and earnest efforts. Tanishka, Avantika, and I were a TriPort, navigating the complexities of CIA assignments and college life.

Our bond was a source of strength and comfort; they were the bread and butter of my

journey, the constant support that helped me push through challenges. Together, we tackled every obstacle, laughed at every mishap, and celebrated each small victory.

But now, as I reflected on those days, I realized how pivotal two people had been in shaping my journey, the impact of two key people hit me hard. Avantika had taught me a painful lesson about love's darker side. Her betrayal wasn't just a heartbreak; it was a harsh reveal that love can be a facade for manipulation. She didn't just walk away—she shattered my trust, showing me how someone can use love to deceive and control.

In contrast, Tanishka had been my anchor. She showed me how to love in moderation and perspective. When Avantika's betrayal left me in pieces, Tanishka was the one who held me together. She dried my tears and helped me see that life is bigger than one person's hurt. Her support was my lifeline, guiding me through the darkest times.

As I grappled with the weight of these

lessons, I couldn't help but wonder: How could someone who seemed so genuine turn out to be so cruel? I thought "meri kya galti thi?" And in the midst of my confusion and pain, I realized there was still so much to unravel and understand.

As I sat there, I could not help but think, "If only I had never met Avantika." If only I had never been drawn into the illusion of her affection. If only I had never been the part of photo collage, the one with her in the purple saree that seemed to symbolize everything I thought I knew about love.

If I had never let her into my world, **if I had never allowed myself to be so deeply entangled in her web of manipulation**, maybe Tanishka and I could have stayed on a different path. Maybe things could have been less complicated, less painful.

But now, these thoughts are just echoes of a past I can't undo. The pain still cuts deep, mingling with the ache of what might have been.