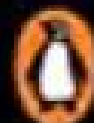
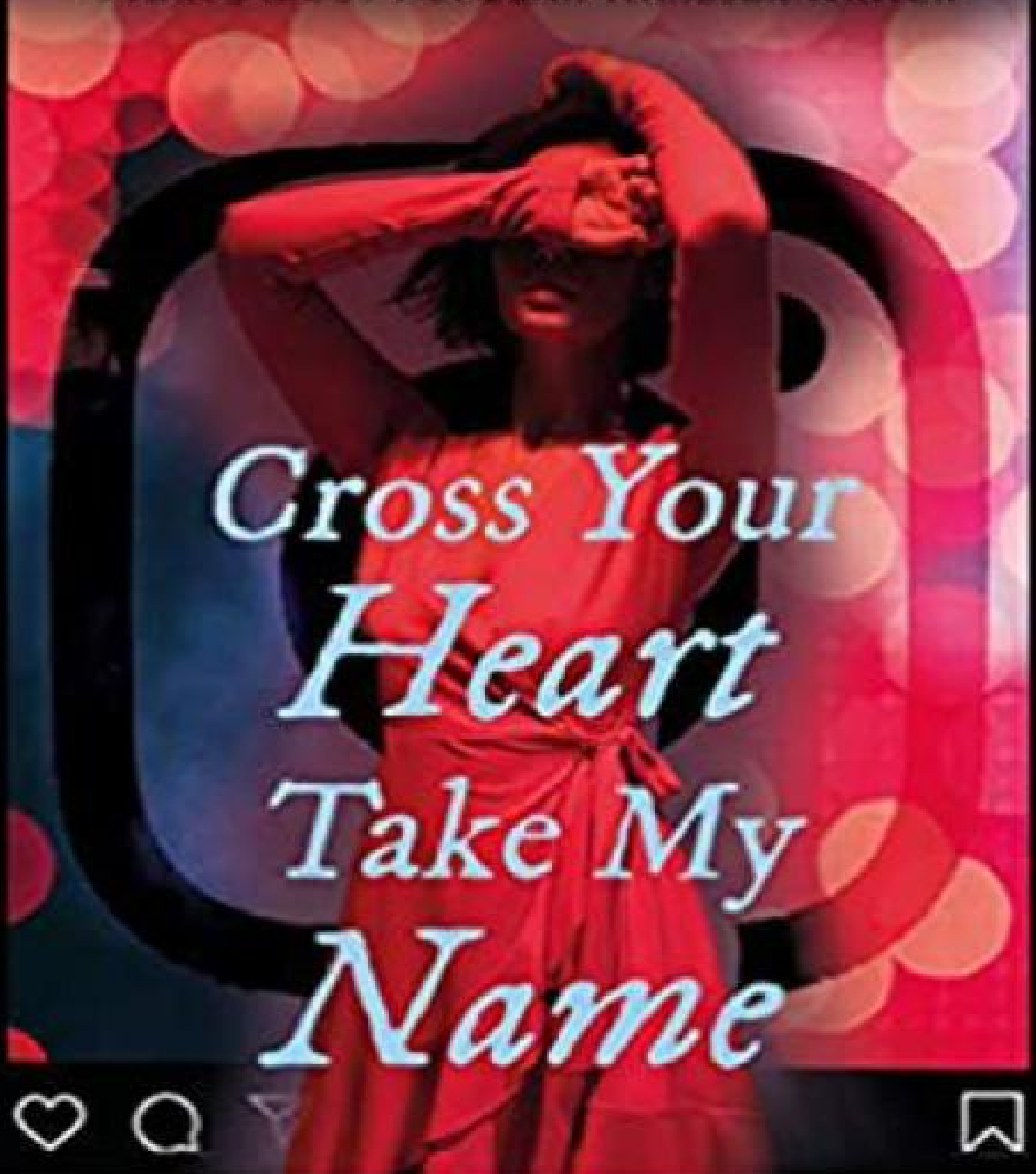


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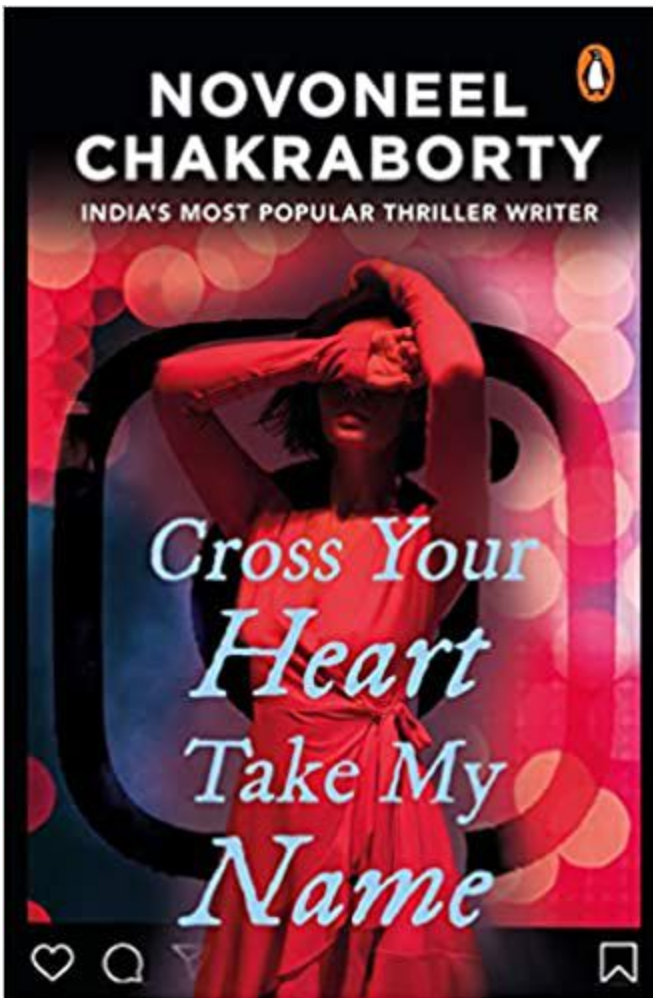


INDIA'S MOST POPULAR THRILLER WRITER

The background of the book cover features a woman in a red dress with her arms raised behind her head, set against a backdrop of colorful, out-of-focus bokeh lights in shades of red, orange, and pink. A large, dark, stylized letter 'D' is partially visible behind the woman.

Cross Your Heart Take My Name





Prologue

The End of a Romance

PRESENT

25 February 2019

Have you ever disappeared from someone's life just like that? No intimation. No conversation. Nothing. Well, I'm going to do that. Today. In fact, in a few hours.

Since the time I woke up, I had a knot in my stomach. The ominous kind that constantly whispered that nothing would go right. I don't remember the

last time I woke up with my head buzzing like this. But the good thing was I was looking ahead to a busy day. Busy days take care of whispers like these and other unnecessary thoughts. I had no time to waste but my anxiety led me to an early morning smoke. I do smoke but not this early. I have my first cigarette with coffee after I reach office. But today was different. Or perhaps today was mundane but I was different. For starters, I was not going to office.

I looked out as I exhaled a puff of smoke, admiring the vivid splash of colour that was already appearing at the horizon despite the blanket of smog. The view put me at ease. The idea of living in a concrete building only to stare at other concrete buildings suffocated me. I had always wanted to live in a place from where I could watch the horizon. Horizons! The only time nature seems to have closure, contrary to its otherwise limitlessness.

But this view, my bedroom, my wardrobe, my coffee machine . . . I wouldn't see them ever again. The thought was as exciting as it was scary. Leaving something behind always troubled me. But for the first time, I was seeking adventure in that 'trouble'. I stubbed out my cigarette and messaged her: Good morning. This was more to check if she had woken up. Our destination was the same today. That reminded me of something she'd once said: Doesn't matter if two individuals have the same destination. The journey is always different. I'd asked her why she thought so, and she'd replied that perspectives were always different even if the relationship was the same. I guess she was right.

We generally never exchanged 'good morning'

messages. In fact, we were yet to exchange anything which could possibly lead to any monotony. Why seek what you are running away from in the first place? The message didn't get delivered.

I chose not to waste any more time. I showered, got dressed in casual attire, ate a quick breakfast—half a bowl of cornflakes and three boiled egg whites—picked up the bag I'd packed and left. I placed a note on the dining table under a vase which had some fresh lilies I had bought the previous night. Before firing up my SUV, I checked my phone again. The message had still not been delivered. I sent another one: I'm on my way. Will reach in an

hour. See you. This time the message got delivered along with the previous one. I didn't think much about it and drove off.

While driving to the spot where we were supposed to meet, I felt like one of those kids who'd told his mother that he was going to school but was actually bunking class to watch an adult film with his friends. I was sure she felt the same. It had been—I counted in my mind—

twenty-six times in six odd months since we had met, and yet we had planned this like we had known each other for years. I realized it was not about the number of meetings or the amount of time that you spent with a person, it was about how intense your feelings were for each other, how strong the bond was. Our plan was simple. We would meet at a dhaba in Lonavala, where she would abandon her car, and drive to Mumbai together in my car. We would then leave my car in the parking lot of one of the malls and take an Uber to the

international airport. From there we would catch a flight to Santorini, Greece. Why Santorini? That was her favourite place. What would we do there? We didn't know. Till now, we both had been running after a plan in life. Not any more. We both wanted to live like nomads.

We wanted to belong only to the present without any baggage from the past or any care for the future.

Unbelievable, right? I know.

I reached the dhaba and lit a cigarette as I waited for her to either message or call me. She did neither. As the day progressed, I started getting calls from work. I took some time to sort them out. Nobody knew I was going to disappear. It was unfair to my employees and the company. But the essence of this plan was to not think about others. It was about being selfish and living for yourself.

I'd left home around 7 a.m. and now it was close to 10 a.m. I toyed with the idea of giving her a missed call. I'd never called her without her permission before.

It was times like these when I missed being on social media. I could only get in touch with her through calls and WhatsApp messages. She always complained about it, but photographs troubled me. I finally tapped on her name in the contacts list of my phone. I hadn't changed her name to anything fictitious, unlike her who had saved

my number as 'Kavya' on her phone. I would have cut the call on the second ring, but she picked up on the first, leaving me surprised.

'Reaching in two minutes,' she said and hung up. Indeed, she was there in less than two minutes.

'Where were you?' I asked. As an unsaid rule, we never hugged in public. She got out of her car, came over and settled next to me. She turned to look at my luggage in the back seat sheepishly. I frowned. 'I'm sorry but we will have to postpone our plan,' she said. Her voice seemed a little tense. 'Is everything all right?' I asked.

'No, but I can't tell you anything right now. I have to go now. I came here only to say this.' That was odd. She could have just messaged me. 'But you needn't have driven all this way if our plan was going to be postponed.' 'I'm not fretting over it; why are you?' I chose to interpret her willingness to drive here all the way from Pune as her way of respecting whatever we had between us. What did we have between us? This question had given me sleepless nights. I wanted to ask her so many questions. Till when were we postponing our plan?

We had a flight to catch later in the night. What about that? 'Whatever it is, I'm always there for you, if you count on me,' I said. 'Of course, I count on you. Why else would I come this far only to tell you that I need

some more time?' It felt good to hear that. Sometimes we need reassurance.

'Cancel your ticket? I'll tell you when to rebook it,' she said. 'Okay.' I didn't want to ask too many questions about the tickets. We had booked them and applied for visas separately in any case. 'Want to have some tea before we disperse, now that we have come this far?' I asked. She nodded.

We ordered two cups of kadak ginger tea from the dhaba and sipped them in silence.

Then I walked her to her car. She sat in the driver's seat, started the engine, but then suddenly stuck her head out of the window and did something she'd never done before. She kissed me in public. The suddenness of it took me by surprise but by the time I surrendered to the kiss, she pulled back. 'I'll miss everything,' she said, and before I could say anything else, she drove off. Why would she say 'everything'? I looked around. A few passers-by had seen us smooch. Ignoring their glares, I got into my car and drove off. I followed her car till she took a left from the Wakad flyover for her home while I headed straight for the office. Though I wasn't supposed to go to work, the change in plan made me decide otherwise. I kept checking my phone for messages from her but there were none. The knot in my stomach eased as I got busy with my day but came back as I lay in bed at night and asked Alexa to play my playlist. Music was

my perfect lullaby. During the third song, I felt my phone vibrate. There was a message from her. It read: I'm sorry I couldn't meet you today. Will meet you soon and discuss our plan. I have cancelled my ticket. Hope you have done it too. I read the message again and again but still didn't understand what she was talking about. I replied: We did meet. What happened? All okay? The message did not get delivered. Not the next morning. Not ever.

PART 1: GARV

1

3 September 2018

She was a blur when I first saw her. And that's probably why things were always clear between us. I was at Bengaluru's Kempegowda International Airport, waiting to board my flight to Pune, which was delayed because of a technical snag and rescheduled for 2 a.m. It was just

the kind of day, in hindsight, when one thing led to another. I think I fell in love with places more than people. And empty airports had an introspective vibe to them. I was having dinner at the executive lounge when I spotted an old client. He remembered me clearly but I took some time to recognize him. That was typical of me.

I took time. He was the same guy who had this bad habit of picking his nose all the time. That evening too he picked his nose while talking to me and then used the same fingers to grab an onion slice from his dinner plate and stuff it into his mouth. I felt like throwing up. I just couldn't tolerate things like these. That's why I avoided watching gory horror films while eating. I cut short my lounge time, lying to him that boarding for my flight was about to commence, and headed straight for my departure gate which was more or less empty. I picked up a magazine on the way. After two hours, I had flipped through it twice. I found myself stifling a yawn. The lights by the gates had been dimmed, and soon I fell into a fitful sleep. I was not sure how many minutes had passed when I opened my eyes, squinting against a bright light that was directly falling on them. I sat up and realized it was from someone's phone. The woman in the seat beside mine was talking on her phone. She had accidentally left the flashlight on. I think seeing me move, she understood something was wrong. When she realized

what it was, she quickly disconnected the call and switched off the flashlight. 'I'm so sorry,' she said.

Before I could respond, she added, 'I didn't know this stupid light was on. Did I disturb you?' I was confused.

I didn't know what to respond to first. That's how I was, always a little alert when a woman approached me or spoke to me. Not an awkward kind of alert. The kind where I wanted to say the best line, be my best self and flash my best smile. Not that my zeal to impress would take me or us anywhere. Still. 'It's all right. If you hadn't woken me up, I wouldn't have known I was asleep,' I said. Smart enough? Funny enough? I got my answer in the slight smile she flashed. 'Sorry once again,' she said and turned away from me. She had a husky voice, like she was recovering recovering from a sore throat. For no particular reason, I always wanted to know a woman with a naturally husky voice. She began to fidget with her phone. I didn't go back to sleep and, for reasons unknown, observed her from the corner of my eye.

Maybe I didn't have anything better to do right then. She grabbed her battered Samsonite by its handle, stood up and pulled it in her direction, but the handle gave way and came off in her hand. She cast me a quick glance before looking at the suitcase disappointedly. Perhaps checking if anyone had noticed and if she should be embarrassed. I didn't want to but ended up looking at her.

We held each other's gaze for a few seconds before she said, 'Just that kind of day. My phone misbehaves, my suitcase betrays.'

'Happens,' I said, trying to reassure her.

'Do you mind keeping an eye on this? I just need to get some coffee,' she said. 'Sure,' I said, my eyes following her as she walked over to the closest coffee counter. I didn't know if it was the mention of coffee or the possibility of an interesting conversation with an attractive woman or simply my passive instinct for adventure taking over, I stood up with my laptop bag in one hand and, pulling her suitcase, walked to the coffee counter. She was surprised to see me. 'It's the coffee,' I said and ordered a black brew. I told myself that if she was smart, she would know it wasn't the coffee.

‘Want to sit there?’ she asked, pointing at two empty chairs. She was smart. ‘Sure,’ I said. As we settled down, she placed the coffee mug on the table between us and said, ‘I guess we are on the same flight. We are at the same departure gate.’ ‘I’m going to Pune,’ I said, emptying half a sugar sachet into my cup and stirring it.

‘Same.’ ‘What do you do, if I may ask,’ I said, in an attempt to break the ice and make the otherwise boring airport sojourn a tad interesting.

‘No basics, please. I hate basics,’ she said. ‘Okay,’ I said, already judging this as a bad start. Not that I was seeking anything long-term with her, but just an interesting memory, however momentary. I allowed her some time in case she wanted to steer the conversation in some other direction. But she didn’t. That was unexpected. She was the one who had suggested we sit together and now she wasn’t talking. But then I was the one who had come up to her. The thought made me smile. She still didn’t start a conversation and seemed busy with her phone, so my eyes left her face and darted around till they settled on her again. I noticed her becoming floral dress.

‘It’s from Zara,’ she said. ‘Hmm?’ I didn’t get what she meant. ‘In case you want to gift this dress to someone. It’s from Zara.’ Ah, so the mobile thing was a pretence. Her eyes were on me, I thought. ‘Thanks. But I’m really bad at gifting clothes.’ ‘Okay, what are you good at then?’ she asked. ‘Talking to strangers at odd hours in airports, maybe.’ The way she put her phone down told me that perhaps my quip had interested her.

‘You were asking me about basics,’ she said. ‘Yeah, but if you aren’t comfortable then we can . . .’

‘Let’s play a game.’ ‘Game? Whoa, all right.’

‘Yeah, a game. A game of any sort always makes the moment interesting.’ ‘Second that. So . . .’ ‘So, the game

is that we don’t give out any details about ourselves. The other person has to guess intelligently from whatever he or she can deduce.’ Impressive, I thought and said,

‘Bring it on.’ ‘I’ll start. Then we can alternate.’ ‘Got it.’

‘The fact that you haven’t brought your phone out in the last ten minutes or so tells me you aren’t into social media. You are the type who uses it when you need it,’ she said. Wow! Is the game more interesting or the woman? I wondered and said, ‘Bang on. I really don’t like to . . . ’ ‘We don’t have to give any justification or explanations. Just say true or false. Your chance.’ I took a few seconds before responding. I didn’t want to sound dumb with my observation. ‘Since you brought along an old Samsonite, I believe you don’t travel much. Else you would . . . ’ ‘True!’ She didn’t let me complete my sentence. But a childlike happiness filled me when she confirmed my guess. ‘My turn,’ she said and added, ‘You aren’t a reader.’ ‘Why do you say that?’ ‘Someone who gets a flimsy magazine to pass time before a delayed flight is more about pictures than words.’

‘Kind of true.’ I was looking straight at her and yet wasn’t able to decipher much from her expression.

That was a problem with me. I couldn’t understand what a person was thinking from his or her face. I knew a lot of people who could. And it was a helpful skill as it let

you get ahead in conversations like these. ‘Kind of?’ She sounded bemused. ‘All right, I don’t read much. In fact, I didn’t buy the magazine for the pictures either.’ ‘Ah, you were seeking some kind of company.’ ‘Maybe.

Weren’t you?’ ‘That’s the game. What makes you think I was?’ I knew I had to think on my feet. And I did. ‘Why else would you sit here with a stranger and play a game?

You also want to pass time like me. I had my magazine.

You have me.’ The remark was a bit flirtatious, and I didn’t know if it was too direct or made her uncomfortable. ‘A magazine can be flipped through at will. Not a human being.’

The change in the tone of her voice took me by surprise. If she was a book, even though I was not much of a reader, this was when I would conclude

that ‘she’

was unputdownable. ‘You are a lonely soul, aren’t you?’

For a moment, I didn’t know if it was a general question or part of the guessing game we were playing. I was also a bit taken aback by its accuracy. It was true to the core.

In the past few years, I had never shared my raw, naked, unfiltered feelings with anyone. I was about to ask what made her say that when an announcement over the public address system indicated that boarding had begun. ‘Time to leave,’ she said and excused herself to join the queue.

The way she went off, without a care, told me she was good at severing connections. In today’s times, I thought,

that was one helluva skill to have. The ability to detach oneself just like that. I too stood up and walked towards the gate. It wasn’t sequential boarding so I was way behind her in the queue. I did spot her when I boarded the flight. She was in the third row, clicking a selfie. But our eyes didn’t meet. I went and settled in my seat: 27D.

I wondered how in all these years I had fallen in love with places more than people. A place made you feel what no person ever did. But when I met her, I felt, at the cost of being cheesy, like she was a place. And I had an irresistible impulse to explore every nook and corner of her. Not necessarily her body, but her soul. Just as the flight was beginning its descent, one of the air hostesses came up to me with a paper napkin and said it was from the lady in 3A. I knew who occupied that seat. When I read what was written on it, I smiled because it seemed unreal.

2

PRESENT

Garv was feeling lonely. The way you felt when you had someone in your mind but not beside you. And then there were questions to make the loneliness worse. What had she meant by that message? They did meet.

They had tea together. She kissed him as well. He couldn't possibly have imagined all these things. She told him loud and clear that their plan to disappear had to wait for some time. And he understood. Like he always did, without questioning her. This was not a Mills & Boon romance.

Both of them were married to different people.

The note Garv had written and placed under the vase of fresh lilies was for his wife, Nihira. He'd taken an entire day to think what he could write to justify his act. What could a husband say to a wife before leaving her abruptly for no fault of hers? He simply didn't have the courage to tell her the truth. That was wrong, he knew. And he'd convinced himself that a note would make up for it. After dwelling on it for a long time, he thought the best thing, instead of a long emotional

message, would be to write three simple words: I am sorry. To tell Nihira that he still loved her, he kept the note under the vase with lilies, her favourite. Few words; old-fashioned symbolism—the end of a relationship.

Nihira was supposed to fly back from Bengaluru today.

And what did he have for her? A note stating that he was sorry. The more Garv thought about it now, the more ridiculous he felt. How had he come to this decision?

Was he simply being impulsive? As he tore up the note and threw it in the dustbin, Garv realized he had something more important to find out: Where on earth was Yahvi? He had been messaging her since last night; he had tried her number twice in an interval of three hours but there had been no response. The first time it rang but the second time the number was switched off. Had the battery drained out or had she intentionally switched it off? Garv wondered but concluded she must be up against some problem. And beyond a phone call or a WhatsApp message, there was no way he could reach her. Yet this was the person with whom he had decided to 'disappear' for the rest of his life and create an alternate reality. A day after he met Yahvi at the dhaba, Garv decided to stay home but he soon realized he needed to distract himself from thoughts of her. Work was a good distraction.

At thirty, Garv was a serial entrepreneur. His career had started during his fourth year at IIT Delhi. At twenty-one, he had conceived a mobile phone gaming app which he'd sold to an MNC for a hefty amount. It had made him realize that degrees were a sham. What mattered was talent, how he channelled it and added to it through everyday learning. This gave him the courage to drop out of IIT in his final year, which triggered a lot of questions from his family. At twenty-four, Garv sold another business idea to an MNC. It was for a cab-hailing service which was launched two years later. He married Nihira at the age of twenty-seven and soon after set up a food aggregator and delivery start-up in Pune. His office was at WeWork in Futura on Magarpatta Road. As he stepped on to the seventh floor, his company's name and logo came into view: Appetito. From the time he pushed open the thick glass doors till he reached his cabin, he was greeted by a number of people. One of them was Anika Rai. The only person in the office he wasn't sure whether to respond with a smile or just an acknowledging nod.

Garv had a few meetings as per the schedule but his mind was elsewhere. He couldn't help but wonder that he wouldn't have been here if Yahvi had not postponed their plan. After lunch, he settled down to listen to his favourite music to calm his mind, but kept an eye on his phone for a message or call from Yahvi.

But she didn't do either. Nihira called him when she left her place in Bengaluru, then when she got into a cab, then when she reached the airport and finally just before boarding the flight to Pune.

Garv and Nihira had been in a long-distance marriage since the past three years. Before that, they were in a relationship for ten years, right from college.

Nihira was studying sociology in DU. They met during a group trip to Ladakh where common friends introduced them. Nihira had never been in a serious relationship before and neither had Garv. While Nihira had seen too many disloyal men around her, dating her friends, to trust anyone, Garv had simply considered love and relationships a waste of time and had instead concentrated on getting through IIT. But this changed after he met Nihira.

And even though Nihira had wanted to quit her job after marriage, Garv knew how much she enjoyed her work and had made her change her mind.

When she was asked by the NGO she worked for to shift to Bengaluru for a special project, he told her it was a matter of just two years and they would sail through. He had promised he would travel to Bengaluru once a month and urged her to do the same. Two years had quickly turned into three. They had both kept their promise and continued to visit each other over weekends. Today, for a change, Nihira was flying in to spend the long week

with her husband. Initially, she'd asked Garv to come to Bengaluru so they could plan a trip to Coorg. But Garv had 'other' plans and had used work as an excuse.

Garv drove to the Pune airport to pick up Nihira.

This was the longest they'd gone without meeting. And the first sight of her made him feel guilty. 'Where are your specs?' she asked. Nihira had this quality. She always put Garv at the top of her list of priorities. And what was he planning to do? Garv felt guiltier. 'I forgot.'

Garv wasn't able to cook up any other excuse. He had been having eyesight problems but no doctor had been able to treat it. The specs and lenses they made him wear didn't help either. And yet Nihira always insisted that he wear them. 'Sometimes I feel I should have cloned myself and kept one version here to make sure you are taking care of yourself and doing what you ought to,' she said. 'Then how would I know which version of you to have babies with?' Garv asked in an amused manner.

'Why are you complaining? You would have also had two legit vaginas.' Garv let out a hearty guffaw. 'You had dinner?' she asked the moment she plonked herself beside him in the car. 'I did. And you?' he asked.

'I didn't want to but my stomach was grumbling so I had a sandwich. I don't think I'm going to eat any more tonight. How are my plants?' The only

responsibility she'd given Garv when she had shifted to Bengaluru was to care for her plants. She was a passionate gardener and a plant mom. 'Why don't you take the plants with you?' Garv had lamented once. 'If I take everything from here, I may lose the will to come back,' she had said. 'Home is not where you are. Home is where the ones you love are,' she had added. Garv couldn't have agreed more. Right then, Nihira's phone rang and she excused herself to answer it. Garv could make out it was a work call. He drove to their apartment in silence. As they neared their gated apartment block, they saw a crowd gathered at the entrance. Garv honked his way in. He wasn't interested in knowing what the bedlam was about, but Nihira immediately jumped out once the car stopped and walked to the main gate.

Perhaps it was this insatiable curiosity that made her want to get involved in people's stories. And that is why she was doing so well at the NGO. Garv was unlocking the main door of their flat when Nihira came up, her eyes clouded over. 'A woman died in the afternoon. Didn't you get to know when you left the building to come to the airport?' Nihira asked. 'No, I came straight from office.' 'I see.' 'Some Yahvi Kothari,' Nihira said. Garv froze for a second before recovering quickly and turning the key one last time. The news left him numb.

3

18 September 2018

One final guess. Your eyes tell me you want to meet me again. How about 18 September, 5.30 p.m., Starbucks, Aundh? This was what was written on the paper napkin, the one the air hostess had handed over. I hadn't responded. I had thought she would wait for me at the exit once the flight landed, or outside the airport, but I was wrong. She had left me with a question without caring for an answer. The meeting had seemed far away then, a good two weeks away. I had thought I would decide closer to the date. I had been sure I would soon forget about it.

But as the date neared, I found myself thinking about her. My mind was in a dilemma: Should I go or not? Would she come? Why hadn't she waited at the airport if she wanted to meet me? Why two weeks later?

And then I laughed out loud. Why was I contemplating so much when I didn't know shit about this woman?

Sometimes, I felt it was not about who the person was. It was about your emotional state when someone new stepped into your life. It was the timing. If this had

happened a few years ago, I wouldn't have even cared to play a game at an airport with a stranger or taken a note scribbled on a paper napkin seriously. But now I had done that. Or should I say I wanted to. And it was probably this want that made me eventually go to Starbucks to meet her. I wanted to see if this woman was genuinely interested or was just playing a practical joke on me.

It turned out she wasn't joking. I felt good knowing that. As I entered the Starbucks in Aundh, I spotted her sitting at a corner table. By the way she held her mobile phone, trying to click a selfie, I knew it had to be her. I don't forget a person's body language. She was wearing . . . I don't remember. She was fair. She was almost as fair as my wife, Nihira. For some weird reason, though, I didn't remember her skin tone from our first meeting at the Bengaluru airport. As I walked towards her, I realized Nihira was fairer. Anyway, it didn't really matter. 'Continuing the guessing game?' she asked as I pulled the chair opposite hers and sat down, 'Seeing you here tells me I interested you.' I recognized her husky voice. 'The napkin note told me I interested you as well.'

This time I didn't want to play catch-up. 'I'm Garv Roy Gill,' I said. 'You told me your name so that I feel compelled to tell you mine, right?' she asked. 'Knowing each other's names helps . . . I guess.' The last bit was

deliberate. The word 'guess' had become a thing between us. 'Helps in what?' I rolled my eyes animatedly, which made her smile. 'I'm Yahvi Kothari,'

she said. 'Nice to meet you, Yahvi,' I said, getting my tongue around the unique name. 'Same here, Garv. It's quite an uncommon name.' 'So is yours.' 'Thanks.' The barista called out Yahvi's name. 'I'm sorry, I already ordered my frappé.' 'Let me get it for you.' 'Thanks!

Could you also get a few sachets of brown sugar?’ I nodded and walked to the counter. Before picking up her coffee, I ordered an Americano for myself. After a few minutes, I walked back, balancing a tray between my hands. ‘Did you anticipate anything before coming here?’ she asked as I sat down on my chair. ‘As in?’

‘As in we all cook up a fictitious future in our minds based on our present. For example, this meeting of ours. Did you think where this would lead to?’ ‘Not really. To be honest, you wanting to meet me again was in itself a surprise. I just wanted to first check if you meant it or just . . . ’ ‘I don’t blame you. Such things generally don’t happen.’ ‘Exactly.’ ‘That’s what I like.

To experience things which aren’t general, aren’t meant for everyone,’ she said and leaned forward before adding, ‘One life, right? Why not make it as interesting as possible?’ ‘Absolutely.’ She reclined in her chair and, taking a sip of her frappé, asked, ‘So, Garv, you live

alone here or with family?’ ‘I live alone. What about you?’ ‘I live with my husband,’ she said matter-of-factly.

Honestly, my stomach tightened into a knot on hearing the word ‘husband’, though I didn’t know why.

It wasn’t like we were meeting after connecting on a matrimonial website. ‘My wife lives in Bengaluru,’ I clarified. ‘Why this distance, if I may ask?’ she asked.

‘She works there.’ ‘Hmm. I think it’s commendable. Not many couples can take such a decision. To be away and yet remain glued together.’ That was true. Whoever heard of our situation did feel it was unworkable. But we had pulled it off. Only one more year was left before she completed her project and shifted back to Pune with me.

We were staying away for sure. That was a fact. Yet remain glued . . . how glued was glued? I made a mental note to reflect on it later. I noticed her staring at someone.

I turned and saw a fat, bald man. ‘Know him?’

There was a sly smile on her face as she averted her eyes to look at me. ‘I’m sure you’ll judge me.’ ‘Trust me, I won’t. As long as you are comfortable sharing it.’

‘I have this bad habit of . . . ’ ‘Of?’ ‘ . . . of looking at unattractive men, excuse me for sounding shallow, and imagining what our babies would look like.’ For a moment, I thought I hadn’t heard her correctly. But then it sunk in. This woman liked looking at unattractive men

and imagining having babies with them? I seriously didn’t know how to react. ‘Too much information?’ she asked, sounding a bit guilty. I let out a loud guffaw and said, ‘Now I’m really curious to know if you imagined having babies with me when we first met at the airport.’

It was a leading statement. And she understood it.

‘That would be too much information,’ she said.

‘That’s all right. I think we all have this weird and wild side to us.’ ‘I guess so. But my wild side also has a wild side.’ An awkward silence crept in. I took a few seconds to grasp what she had said. ‘May I ask you something?’

I asked, changing the topic. ‘Umm, hmm?’ ‘Were you sure I would come or you just hoped that I would?’ Right then the barista called out my name. ‘Get your beverage first.’ I went to the counter, picked up my Americano, a sugar sachet, a stirrer and turned to come back to the table, only to realize she wasn’t there any more. My gaze fell on a paper napkin kept on the table, and I extended my arm to grab it. ‘An incomplete rendezvous and unanswered questions are more memorable!’ the note read. It meant she was gone for the day. I found that weird and somewhat rude. Why would someone leave just like that? When I turned the napkin around, I saw a phone number on it. My puzzled frown gave way to a smile.

Those ten digits were my only takeaway that day. I wondered what hers was.

PRESENT

Garv didn't know how to react to what Nihira had told him. It sounded so casual coming from her. And rightfully so. What did she know about Yahvi? But Garv knew more than she could tell. Someone named Yahvi Kothari had been found dead in the apartment block where he lived. He didn't want to believe it. His colony—DFL Enclave —had twelve wings. Each wing had eighteen floors and every floor had three flats. It came to a total of 648 flats. How many people did Garv know? Fourteen. How many of them did he interact with? Probably three. Even if there was a Yahvi Kothari in his colony, he wouldn't have known. But there could be many Yahvi Kotharis all over Pune. He didn't want to connect the two incidents: one, the Yahvi he knew not responding to his messages; and, second, the death of her namesake in his colony. Of course, the Yahvi he knew didn't live in the same colony as him. If she did live here then why did she lie to him about living on Park Road with her husband? Most importantly, Yahvi and he were in love with each other. He wasn't a one-night stand from whom she would have wanted to keep her life a secret.

In fact, if she had lived so close to him, the proximity would have helped their love story.

Garv thought of a number of possibilities all through the night, and each time, in his mind, he found a way to convince himself that the one who had died was not the Yahvi he knew. He was sure his Yahvi was caught in circumstances beyond her control and hence wasn't able to message or call him back. He couldn't sleep that night and kept tossing and turning.

The next morning, Nihira cooked his favourite English breakfast, but noticed he was unusually quiet while having it.

'Is it that bad?' she asked.

'Hmm?'

She understood he was lost in thought.

‘What happened?’ Nihira sat down next to him.

‘The usual,’ he quipped.

Nihira grasped his hand and said, ‘You looked all right last night. Anything happened between then and now? You want to tell me something?’

The warmth of her hand made him choke with emotion but he stifled his reaction. I’m in love with another woman. I was about to leave you and disappear with her to start a new life. It was not like I was Just contemplating the step. I would have gone ahead if the woman, Yahvi,

had not asked me to wait for some more time. I feel pathetic right now. Not because my love for you or Yahvi isn’t genuine. I should have known as a grown-up that love has its own place while life’s priorities have their own. And duties and responsibilities always come first.

‘Just work,’ was all Garv could say. ‘How are things with you?’ he asked, changing the topic.

‘Same old. At least some of the recent cases are interesting, otherwise I would have missed you even more,’ Nihira said, squeezing his hand affectionately. He gave her a smile which could have had more warmth, he thought. Sitting in front of her, he realized how wrong his decision to leave her had been. He wouldn’t have been able to redeem himself after that. And yet he had been ready to do it. He had almost done it. He was disappointed with himself. How could he be so impulsive and downright stupid about it all? He quickly finished his breakfast and got up. He knew he was avoiding her, but he needed time. He couldn’t just pretend that everything was okay. Nor could he confess. He needed some space to process it all and find a justification for his stupidity.

Moreover, if Yahvi turned up

tomorrow with a different date for their ‘disappearance’, would he still go?

Before leaving for office, Garv hugged Nihira.

He felt her stiffen in his arms. He held her by her shoulders and looked at her questioningly.

'You are wearing a different fragrance?' she asked. Garv was stunned for a moment. He thought she had caught him with his pants down. Then, realizing she was waiting for an answer, he quickly clarified, 'The team gifted me a perfume a few months ago.'

'How misinformed is your team? Don't they know what their boss uses? Next time, ask them to talk to me before gifting you anything.'

'Sure,' Garv said with a tight smile and gave her a peck on the cheek. As he fired up the ignition and drove out of the parking lot, he wondered how many more things Nihira would discover which had become a part of him because he had chosen to become a part of Yahvi. And wouldn't she have a problem with it? We all customized the person we loved.

And any compromise in that customization could end up ruining everything there was. While driving out of the main gate of the colony, he glanced at the wing where the woman had died. He didn't notice much. Keeping one eye on the road, he checked his phone for any calls or messages. But there was nothing. Yahvi had neither read his messages nor responded to any of them.

On reaching office, Garv found his legal team already waiting for him. He was supposed to make some notes last night, which he had forgotten

to do. Of late, many of his partnering clients had not been respecting their contracts, and Garv had to take a decision on whether to go to court or give them some grace time to clean up their act. As the meeting began, he realized he'd never been so lost in a business meeting before.

Eventually, the decision was taken to give the clients a two-month grace period.

After the meeting, Garv walked over to the coffee machine to get himself a cuppa. Anika was there, helping herself to a strong brew. She smiled at him and said, 'What a nice fit!' He looked up and realized she was staring at his

trousers. This wasn't the first time she'd complimented him in office. It had been a year since she had joined, and from day one she had made it clear through her body language and innuendoes that she was interested in him. But he'd made it amply clear that he was married. When he had realized that 'being married' didn't mean much these days, he had also dropped hints that he wasn't interested.

There was a time when she would insist that he drop her home every day. When Garv realized that she was interpreting his willingness to comply with that request as something else, he changed his timings. When it was the woman who was coming on to you, Garv realized, the line was quite blurred. He had to tread carefully.

It didn't matter how many hashtags on gender equality trended on social media, it all boiled down to whether the people involved knew when they shouldn't cross the line.

'Thanks,' he said, trying not to look too enthusiastic about her compliment.

'Is that from Zara? I too buy from the same brand. In fact, this skirt,' she twirled around before adding, 'is from there. Fits me well, doesn't it?'

Garv knew why she had turned around. It was a figure-hugging skirt.

'It does.' He gave her a wan smile and went back to his desk. He didn't turn back to see if her gaze had followed him.

Garv's desperation made him message Yahvi in the evening: *Where are you? I'm waiting.* The message didn't get delivered. He called her. The number was switched off. A feeling of impending doom hung over him, but he still tried to convince himself that the Yahvi who had died in his colony wasn't the one he knew.

On his way home from office, Garv decided to go to the building where Yahvi Kothari had lived with her husband and investigate. He parked his car and walked over to the lobby of the wing to look at the nameplates. He stared at the one against flat number 1502: Mr and Mrs Kothari.

After a good thirty seconds, he again told himself that this couldn't be *his* Yahvi. Convinced, he went back to his wing.

Nihira opened the door as soon as Garv rang the doorbell. Before he could even enter, she asked him excitedly, 'How do I look?' Garv was taken by surprise. He looked her up and down and said, 'Different.'

'What kind of a compliment is that?' Nihira

sounded disappointed. She went and plopped herself on the couch. 'I was at it since afternoon.'

She seemed upset.

'You look beautiful.' Garv tried to salvage the situation. He knew Nihira was not at fault.

He rarely complimented her on her looks or how she dressed. He looked around and realized she had a plan. The living room smelt of scented candles and the dining table had been laid out with a bottle of red wine, two empty wine glasses, fine crockery, cutlery and four casseroles.

'Anything special?' Garv asked.

Nihira shrugged and said, 'I'm back after a long time.'

'Of course.' He went to her and wrapped his arms around her waist. Giving her a peck on the cheek, he said, 'Don't leave this time.' He wasn't sure if he meant it or had said it just to pacify her.

'I'm trying. Let's see,' Nihira said, positioning her phone in front of them and switching on the

camera.

'Look into the camera,' she said and added, 'My colleague says I rarely put our pictures on the Gram.'

'Put our pictures on the Gram?'

'On Instagram. The entire world is on social media, unlike you,' Nihira said, looking up at him with a wry smile.

'Never made a difference to my life,' he said.

'Not everything is there to make a difference,'

Nihira said, busy posting the picture.

'Hmm, give me a moment. I'll be back after a quick shower,' Garv said and went to the bedroom to change. Then he went to the washroom, switched on the geyser and, while waiting for the water to turn hot, downloaded the Instagram app on his phone. He registered himself, made a fake profile and searched for her name: Yahvi Kothari. There was only one account but not by this exact name. The handle was just

'Yahvi'. The profile had a total of twenty-seven posts and 503 followers, and it was following

accounts. The date of the first post was 5

July 2018. He scrolled down, frowning.

'Did you go off to sleep inside?' Nihira asked as she knocked on the door.

'Just two minutes,' Garv said and turned the hot water tap on. After a quick shower, he came out with a towel wrapped around his waist, and the phone in his hand. He went straight into his balcony. He held his phone at arm's length and clicked a picture. Then he compared it with Yahvi's Instagram picture. It was the same frame, but taken from a slightly different angle.

He turned to his right and saw Yahvi's flat two buildings away. Its balcony also opened to the same view. He visualized the view from that balcony.

No doubt this picture had been taken from there. He felt weak at the knees as the realization dawned. His Yahvi and the dead Yahvi were the same person.

21 September 2018

I did call her. I think anybody in my place would have done the same. It shouldn't be interpreted as desperation. Why would I say so? That's because I didn't call her immediately. It happened a day later, while I was smoking alone below my office building. I was expecting a normal 'hello'

since she didn't have my number. But all I heard was a giggle. And then she said, 'I knew you would call.'

'How did you know it was me?' I couldn't help but sound surprised.

'Truecaller told me the name, Mr Garv Roy Gill.'

Damn! That was obvious. How could have I missed it? I had the Truecaller app too.

'Of course, it's an app world,' I said.

'But the fact that you didn't call me immediately tells me that either you are too busy or you thought about it for a while before calling,' she said. I could sense a hint of amusement in her

voice, as if she was playing with me.

'I thought about it,' I said. *Why lie?*

'So, calling me was a thought-out decision.

Makes me feel important.'

'A lady should always be made to feel important,'

I said. One of those lines women loved to hear.

'We *are* important, even if men don't make us *feel* important.'

She was probably a feminist. Not that I had a problem with that but I still thought I should steer clear of anything that could offend her.

'Did you feel I was coming on to you?' she asked. Well, to be honest, when a woman, or for that matter even a man, gives his or her phone number to anyone, it is an indication of interest, of flirtation.

'I'm not a teenager that I will fall for it.' I intentionally sounded curt. I had noticed that some people had the tendency of interpreting niceness as weakness. I didn't want her to think that about me.

'Good that you said that. I like *men* and not teenagers,' she said. Her tone made me smirk.

'Can I be honest with you?' I asked.

'Not that dishonesty will destroy anything between us. In fact, this is the time when we can be dishonest with each other as there is nothing between us. Yet.'

That pause before the word 'yet' sounded so sexy, like she wanted to know me.

'Kidding! Please be honest. It'll save time,' she said.

'I don't think you shared your number only because you wanted me to call you.'

'Then why did I share my number?'

'So that I could call you and we could decide a place to meet again.'

I put it across as an affirmative sentence.

She agreed, and we decided to meet up in the evening for coffee.

'But, however memorable such meetings may be, this time no incomplete rendezvous.' I was sure she knew what I was talking about. She giggled

and hung up. That too was an incomplete conversation. I didn't tell her that.

Since she lived on Park Road, or so she told me on the phone, we had decided to meet at The Pavilion, one of the fancier malls in the city. It was she who'd messaged me the details after ending the call.

5:30 p.m., The Pavilion?

Okay.

Though it was a little far from my office, I didn't mention it. In her opinion, men didn't crib, and I didn't want to challenge the notion.

Coincidentally, our cars entered the parking lot at the same time, one right behind the other.

I recognized her from the way she tilted her head to look at me when our cars came parallel to each other. I had noticed this quirk of hers at the airport too. There was a specific manner in which she cocked her head slightly to one side.

Especially while clicking selfies. I gestured towards the parking lot. She drove on. I followed.

We found two parking slots next to each other.

She stepped out of her car and gave me a side hug. You know the kind where both the shoulders aren't involved? Frankly, I wasn't ready for that. I didn't mind it, but it did strike me that the last time we met we just shook hands. I had thought it would be the same today as well. It told me she was comfortable in my company. I think that was important. A person needed to be comfortable with you for any kind of connection to happen. Or was there a connection

because someone felt viscerally comfortable in your presence? Maybe. I didn't consciously try to make her comfortable. Maybe my vibe was like that.

'Don't you think it's funny?' Yahvi asked. We had taken up a corner table at the food court which was, unlike other malls, on the ground floor itself. We

hadn't ordered anything to eat or drink. I had asked her but she had said no. I too wasn't hungry.

'Sorry, I didn't get you. What's funny?'

'The fact that we don't know each other but still took a detour from our normal lives to be here,' she said.

'Ah, that! What would you have done if you were not meeting me here?'

'I would have walked straight back into monotony. What else? How about you?'

'Same. Monotony. Work. Home. Sleep. Repeat.'

'You told me you live alone.'

'Yes. That makes monotony even more monotonous.'

'What do you do to break it?'

'Detours,' I said with an amused smile.

'Plural. So I'm with an experienced "detourer".'

I couldn't help but smile.

'Should I say same pinch?' I asked.

'No way. This is my first detour after marriage.'

'How long have you been married?' I asked and added after a pause, 'If I may ask.'

'If the last bit was still necessary I wouldn't be here. It's been seven years. You?'

'Six.

'By the way, I looked for you on Instagram.

Didn't find you. What's your handle?'

'I'm sorry, I'm not on Instagram.'

'Seriously?'

I nodded.

'I think only two kinds of people aren't on social media these days.'

'And who are they?'

'Somebodies and nobodies.' She laughed out loud at her own joke. I joined in. Then she stopped.

'Or are you one of those who have multiple fake profiles to stalk people?' This time there was a hint of sarcasm in her tone.

'No!'

'Maybe you'd already stalked me on social media when we met at the Bengaluru airport.

And this is all a set-up?' she said, smiling naughtily.

'Continuing the guessing game, I think you read a lot of thrillers,' I quipped.

'Guilty as charged,' she said.

I was about to say something when I heard her cuss.

'Shit!'

I looked up. Her smile had disappeared. She suddenly seemed nervous and tried to look the other way. I understood she had spotted something or

someone. I turned to see what was making her uncomfortable.

It didn't take me long to realize it was a man.

6

PRESENT

It had been a week since Garv had heard from Yahvi. Her phone was still switched off. He was not in denial any more. The Instagram post proved what he didn't want to accept. He understood that the life that had promised him

heaven had taken him straight to hell. Yahvi Kothari was dead. The woman he was in love

with; the woman who had filled his otherwise mundane life with so many memorable moments; the woman who had made him believe

that even at the age of thirty it was possible to build a new future; *his* Yahvi was dead. This was the woman for whom he'd taken the most difficult decision of his life weeks ago: to leave Nihira. And now this woman was dead. What was he supposed to do? Forget her like a vivid dream? Or remember her like a distant reality?

The week saw an increase in Garv's workload.

A few new tie-ups, along with some fundraising presentation meetings, kept him on his toes. He had to make a few trips to Mumbai as well. Every time he crossed that dhaba on the highway where he'd last met Yahvi, he wondered what had gone wrong. Did it have something to do with the postponement of the plan? How did she die? There were no police officers making inquiries in the colony, so he could safely conclude that she wasn't a victim of any malicious intent. But something somewhere wasn't adding

up. And it all made him restless. Till Nihira was here, he had something to distract himself with, but once she left for Bengaluru, he found himself

driving to the places he'd visited with Yahvi and remembering their several rendezvous.

Could a cushion of memories protect someone from their reality?

There were times when he would just scroll through Yahvi's Instagram profile. It had twenty-seven posts in all. The first, which had burst his bubble of denial, was a glimpse of the Pune skyline from the balcony of her flat in DFL

Enclave. Another post was a selfie with a blurred background. There was something about the picture that perturbed him but he couldn't put a finger on it. It was impossible to tell where she'd clicked it. The date of the post was 1 October 2018. And the caption read: *If you want to cross the line, make sure you do it for someone who is worth it.*

It was a line Garv had said during one of their dates. He smiled to himself and quickly checked

the caption of the first post as well. It read: *Certain horizons are closer than you think.* Was that also meant for him? Did she always know they lived in the same colony? And if she did, why didn't she tell him?

Before she left, Garv had asked Nihira what had happened to 'Mrs Kothari'. He had made it sound like a casual question.

'I heard she was suffering from a life-threatening disease. I don't know what exactly. She was only twenty-seven. This is so unsettling.

I've already fixed an appointment for a full-body check-up for us for the coming weekend,' she had said.

Garv hadn't taken it seriously since Nihira always panicked when it came to health. He'd had the same argument many times with her and finally given up. Now he agreed to everything she suggested. Instead, he had focused on Yahvi and why she hadn't told him about the disease. The least he had expected from her was the truth. Why else were they in love? And if she

knew she didn't have long to live, why did she make a plan with him to shift to Greece? Every time Garv retired to bed, he asked himself these questions but couldn't find an answer. And the more he thought about it, the more it screwed him up. He felt like a fool for even considering leaving Nihira. It left him frustrated. He stewed in his own juices. He simmered with suppressed anger but couldn't give vent to his emotions. He was furious at the choice he had made; furious at the fact that he hadn't got closure; and at Yahvi's unwillingness to tell him that she lived in the same colony as him.

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'Don't you think it's odd?' Nihira said. It was the weekend and she had flown in from Bengaluru.

Garv had gone to pick her up from the airport. They were entering their colony when Nihira had asked Garv to slow down in front of the gate. She had popped her head out of the window and asked one of the security guards if Yahvi Kothari's funeral service had been held.

The security guard had replied in the negative.

'What's odd?'

'His wife died and there was no prayer meet or funeral.'

Nihira was right. He hadn't thought about it. Though he hated the thought of going to a prayer meet for the woman he had been in love with, he couldn't agree more with Nihira. It was odd.

'Maybe he did or maybe he was too sad to do it,' he said, more to convince himself than Nihira.

'Too sad to do a funeral service? You know how stupid that sounds, right?'

Garv agreed and quietly drove towards the parking lot. He noticed how Nihira kept waving and greeting people they passed. She caught him looking at her.

'Jealous that even though you live here, people know me better than you?'

He knew she had said it in a lighter vein so his response was just a smirk. But it was true. Not

the jealousy part, but the fact that Garv had always had a problem initiating a conversation with people or even remembering them.

Garv remained quiet through dinner. Nihira talked to her parents on the phone later in the evening, spoke to her cousins on a video call and finally retired to bed. Garv was finishing a video call with his lawyer on a legal matter when Nihira complained of pain in her right thumb.

'Damn, I need to stop playing those silly games on my phone,' she said. Garv stared at her as she shifted her phone from one hand to the other. It was a eureka moment for him. He finally understood what was wrong with Yahvi's Instagram post. Yahvi was a lefty. He had noticed her eat with her left hand, click selfies with her left hand. But she had clearly used her right hand to click this particular picture. Was there more to all this or was he unnecessarily reading too much into it?

7

1 October 2018

'I somewhat agree,' I said.

'Somewhat?' she sounded surprised.

I looked at the row of branded stores to my right. We were in Seasons Mall, the one closer to my office. I was reconsidering what she'd just said: *Sometimes I don't tell my husband everything, fearing he will judge me.* Then she had stated a relationship paradox: *To begin with, your happiness lies in the revelation of the self to your partner and then it lies in how much you cover up.*

'Or hide,' I'd added.

Now, I said as an afterthought, 'I take the somewhat away. I do agree.'

And why wouldn't I. Consider Nihira and me.

We had been together for nine years-from meeting to dating to marriage. Before Nihira, I never had any serious affairs. She had had one in college. They fucked thirty-two times in two weeks. After that they both realized they were kidding each other. Neither was in love. He

looked good, she looked great. Both were attractive.

Both devoured each other's body. And then it was time to move on. The good thing was that neither of them got attached. Then she began a serious relationship with me.

Call it destiny, but we didn't have sex for the longest time during our dating phase. If someone asked me why, I wouldn't have an answer. It just happened that way. Maybe she was carrying a lesson from her previous relationship, while I was never the kind to initiate anything. Then there was also a phase when we craved each other physically. Please don't confuse it with sex.

As I mentioned, sex came much later. What I meant was, I used to wear my best clothes, best perfume, be in my best mood and always take a small gift for her whenever we met. She would do the same. Everything was extreme. Our love, our passion, our fights. I didn't even realize when this phase got over and we were in the next one, where it was okay if I met her without having a bath; in my shorts and chappals. It was

okay if my breath smelt of the food I had eaten.

You know, those small things I was particular about earlier didn't matter any more. It was the same with her. Earlier, she would always be impeccably groomed, but then I started noticing that stray armpit hair. Nothing wrong with that but I knew something had changed. Perhaps we had become comfortable in each other's company and had left the pretence behind, revealing our true selves. Come to think of it, with how many people can we actually be ourselves?

Till we confessed our love for each other, Nihira and I used to share our craziest and most unfiltered fantasies. Like the filthiest ones, with no fear of judgement. And then she stopped. I thought she wasn't comfortable or

interested, so I didn't bring it up. In fact, I did, once or twice, but was told it wasn't the right time. I respected that and waited. Then I realized that too was a phase within a phase.

We got married. I realized we were more excited about this new institution our relationship

was made to sign up for than we were about each other. She was happier seeing her mehndi than cuddling with me. It doesn't mean we didn't cuddle. But probably by then we were taking our cuddles for granted and they ceased to be special. And now, after all these years, we just gave each other updates. I had this for lunch.

I bought that today. Those were not conversations.

I still sought those indelible night-long chats that brought a smile to my face. Those stopped happening altogether.

Yahvi and I stepped on to an escalator. I didn't know where we were going. During our last meeting, she had spotted someone who knew her. She had not only hidden her face but had asked me to immediately get up and go to the washroom. I didn't ask her any questions, guessing the obvious. I didn't go to the washroom; instead, I went to the other corner of the food court as quickly as I could. And from there I saw the man for a second. What stayed with me was his flowy hair.

His body language told me that he was surprised to see her there. He approached her, they hugged, and after talking for a few seconds, they went out. A moment later, I received a message from her which read: *I'm so sorry. That's my husband.*

Leaving now. I'll message you later.

Yet another incomplete rendezvous, I had thought. I wanted to ask her why she had seemed so nervous after seeing her husband.

After all, we could just be two friends chatting over a meal. But I had kept it to myself. I thought it was a personal thing. Why probe unnecessarily?

I was not the kind of person who interfered in people's lives to feed my own curiosity.

We stepped off the elevator and started walking again. Aimlessly. It was actually fun.

To be with a person with whom you don't have any destination to achieve. Your choices become your journey. Like Yahvi and I choosing to meet up for the fourth time.

'What made you conclude that?' I asked, referring to the relationship paradox she had

told me about. I phrased the question as subtly as I could.

'Why don't you ask me straightaway: What's my relationship like with my husband?'

„well ... '

'It's okay. I don't mind sharing. And I appreciate your decency. I think that's important.

Brashness of any kind is a turn-off.'

I made a mental note.

'I don't think he is the kind who has time for details. Never mind details about me. That doesn't mean he doesn't love me. He asks me all the basic questions. But then a time comes in every relationship when you want more. The basic stuff can come from anyone with whom you are sharing a space unless the person is emotionally myopic. Domesticity conditions you to be content with just the basic stuff. You see the kind of differences that can arise this way?'

I was still processing her words when she added: 'He doesn't ask me the questions I want

to answer.'

'For example?' I asked.

'Umm, for example, I don't want him to ask me which international destination we should travel to next. He should know by now that a fancy place alone doesn't appeal to me. I'm not like his friend's wife. OMG, we went to Rome.

OMG, we are going to Iceland. And then go and pose there as if it's Disneyland. Maybe that's what she likes. I don't. I want to know the people, the culture, the food, the mindset of a specific region. Don't tell me "let's visit Norway", tell me "let's explore Norse mythology through its people". It may seem like it's only about how he phrases the question, but let me tell you, it's not.

I think somewhere my expectations from him have outgrown his love for me.'

We entered a cafe and ordered coffee. None of us spoke. I had always longed for this kind of connection where silence was comfortable. And because we didn't talk, we felt more connected.

Words help create connections, but the best

connections transcend words. Another paradox perhaps, I wondered.

Our cups of coffee arrived. She took hers from the tray. I noticed she did so with her left hand.

I didn't know why I hadn't noticed it earlier, but at that moment when I tried thinking back I recalled that she had pulled her Samsonite with her left hand the first time we had met. In fact, she held her phone in her left hand, especially when clicking pictures.

'You're a lefty?' I asked, realizing it was totally out of context.

She glanced at me and then at her left hand holding the coffee. 'Yeah.' It was clear she wasn't anticipating this. 'Why?' she asked.

'Just like that. All the crushes I have had till date, the real and the celeb ones, were all lefthanded.'

She gave me an 'are-you-serious' look.

'No, no, no. I wasn't being flirtatious. I meant it,' I clarified immediately.

'You've a kink for the left hand?'

'No!'

'Hmm. Wait a second.' She shifted her coffee cup to her right hand and clicked a selfie with her left.

'Need to send this to my husband to show I'm indeed out shopping,' she said, in a way that told me I was her secret.

8

PRESENT

This was the longest Nihira had stayed with Garv since she shifted to Bengaluru. A total of nine days. The maximum till now was the fourday holiday she usually took for Diwali every year. Though Garv was half Bengali from his mother's side, Nihira could never get a few days off for Durga Puja except the Dussehra holiday.

Both Garv and Nihira's parents lived in Delhi.

Garv's resided in CR Park while Nihira's were in Dwarka. That saved them time whenever they decided to go home unlike their other married friends whose parents lived in different states.

Nihira confessed to Garv that the heavy workload had kept her away from Pune most of last year, and she had missed spending weekends with him. She worked in the Bengaluru office of an NGO, which counselled women who were victims of crime. It also organized group therapy sessions, especially for women, across age groups, to help those in need of mental and emotional support.

It was all very interesting in the beginning.

Different cases, different stories, different insights into human nature and psychology. But with time, the work started taking a toll on Page 45 of 197
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her. She started having sleepless nights and experiencing restlessness throughout the day.

On the nights she managed to drift off, she would have nightmares filled with the victims'

faces and their stories. She consulted the NGO's psychiatrist herself, without telling Garv about it. She knew he would ask her to terminate the contract and move back to Pune. And do what?

With a graduation degree in economics and a post-graduation in sociology, Nihira had never wanted to work in a private company and focus on earning money alone. The value of life was important for her. At the end of a hard workday, she wanted to make a difference in someone's life. Nihira, inherently, always focused on what she had instead of what could have been. She never let delusions of grandeur take over, and as a result never felt unsatisfied with what she had or where she was. Though, deep in her heart, she too didn't like the idea of a long-distance marriage, she consoled herself that it was a matter of just two years, as was mentioned in her contract. But another year was added when the NGO almost begged her to stay back.

She discussed it with Garv and together they thought another year wouldn't make much of a difference.

'Sometimes we are so enamoured by the aura of mystery and romance created by the "what if"

that we convince ourselves it is better than the

"what is",' Nihira had once told Garv when they went on a long drive from Pune to Lonavala.

Not that Garv complained much during her prolonged absences. Except for the occasional

'I am missing you', 'stay longer' and 'I wish you didn't have to go back'. But those were so transitory that neither Nihira nor Garv took them seriously. And the routine went on with neither doing anything to halt it.

Over the last six months, Garv had built a dream bubble with Yahvi in which he'd contained his reality. And Nihira didn't exist in that bubble. Or even matter. But during the nine days she had spent with him, Garv felt like he had come home after a long holiday. The realities dawned on him, the duties, the responsibilities.

And he realized he couldn't allow a holiday to sway him. For where you stay is your reality.

And Nihira was Garv's. Now, every time Garv went out with Nihira, to shop or eat or watch a movie, he missed Yahvi even more. He had become used to her company. Her laughter. Her

jokes. Her sly comments. Her promises. Suddenly, the woman he had married, with whom

he had spent a good eight years, had become a faded hard copy of a photograph in which the details were hazy. When Yahvi was breaking the tedious monotony of his life, turning it into a roller-coaster ride, he hadn't missed Nihira.

Their sex life was predictable: one position, a few smooches, some mild biting, and done.

Since their relationship was devoid of any carnal passion, sex never became boring. But it didn't become interesting either. Both thought that's how married people had sex. So neither complained. But this had changed last Saturday evening.

Nihira was in Pune for the weekend. It was one of those mundane evenings when they had not planned anything. Garv was sitting on the couch, reading

a business article on his iPad. Nihira came into the living room and poured herself a glass of wine. She then walked up to him and squeezed herself into his arms, spilling some wine on his forearm. Before he could wipe it off, she licked it up with her tongue. Garv frowned.

That was unusual for Nihira, even though sex between them always happened on impulse.

As she pressed her lips against his, he closed his eyes. The memory of Yahvi's face flashed through his mind. He opened his eyes and saw Nihira, who had closed her eyes. An unprecedented urgency exploded within him. He let go of his iPad and started chewing on Nihira's lips.

'Ummm ... ahh, slowly,' she said, looking up, but Garv's lips were on hers again. His hands slid under her nightie, pulled her panties to one side and caressed her wet clitoris.

'What has happened to you?' Nihira gasped.

She was enjoying it but knew these weren't her husband's moves. He'd never gone for her vagina with his fingers before. Garv slid down and spread her legs. He knelt on the floor and, before she knew it, placed his mouth on her vagina. He could taste her arousal.

'Fuuuuuck!' Nihira gasped, shutting her eyes as her hands grabbed his hair. Garv remained there for quite some time, his tongue conversing

with her vaginal folds. Nihira could feel herself oscillate. Every time she thought she was close to an orgasm, she would be pulled back from it.

'Let's go to the bed, baby,' she moaned. Garv bunched up her nightie and left a trail of kisses as he moved up. She raised her hands up and the nightie came off the next second. As she got busy unhooking her bra, Garv doffed his shorts and took off his T-shirt. He then pulled down her panties. Suddenly aware of her nakedness, Nihira asked Alexa to dim the lights. Alexa was quick to obey. She went towards the bedroom, knowing Garv would follow. But before she could reach its door, Garv pulled her and pinned her against the wall, mauling her breasts and kissing her

everywhere. She could feel her knees weaken. And just when she thought she could slip in another request, Garv turned her around.

He held her by the waist and pulled her towards him. Nihira stood with her hands on the wall, her hips jutting out, her eyes rolling up with pleasure.

'Baby, please. Bedroom. Please,' she pleaded.

But then let out a little whimper as Garv bit her bare butt. She knew the mark wouldn't go easily. She didn't care. Right then she felt his penis enter her. It felt harder than ever before.

And thicker. Almost like someone else's penis.

His penis touched her G-spot with every thrust while his nails dug into the flesh around her hips. After a few relentless thrusts, he came. So did she. Together, they collapsed on to the floor.

The cold floor met the heat their bodies generated.

They revelled in the moment.

Once Nihira got her breath back, she excused herself and tiptoed to the washroom. Garv noticed a slight blush on her face. He picked up his shorts and wore them. *What was that?* Garv wondered. It was easily the best sex he had had with his wife. After eight years of marriage. Best because of a lot of new things: the position, the fact that they weren't on their bed but standing against a wall, and that intense bite. He knew she was in pain while he was at it and yet he

didn't let go. Garv had always been soft and gentle with her before tonight.

'What happened to you?' It was Nihira. She had wrapped herself in a towel. She picked up her nightie and turned to leave. She stopped by the bedroom door and said, 'Come inside now.'

And then smiled at the pun of it.

Garv followed her. As they lay in bed, Nihira's head on his chest, she whispered in his ears, 'I loved it. Whatever turned you this rough, just carry that on.'

Garv looked at Nihira. Her eyes were closed, and there was a peaceful smile on her face. He couldn't tell her why he was different today.

From the time Garv and Nihira's lips had met, images of him and Yahvi together had flashed through his mind. He wasn't having sex with Nihira. He was punishing Yahvi for leaving him like that. And for not telling him she was suffering from a life-threatening condition. He thought he had the right to know. That made him angry. And this was a way to vent it out.

Nihira had an afternoon flight to Bengaluru.

Garv decided to take her for brunch to Sante Spa Cuisine in Koregaon Park. While they were waiting for their order, Garv noticed a man sitting alone at a table, scratching his arms. He scratched in a particular manner that seemed familiar to Garv. He had seen the man talking to the guard of his colony, DFL Enclave.

'Isn't that ... ?' Garv started. Nihira turned to follow his gaze.

'Mr Kothari. Why do you look startled?' she asked.

'No, nothing,' Garv said. It was one of those coincidences he wasn't ready for.

A minute later, Nihira excused herself to go to the washroom. With her gone, Garv turned to look at Mr Kothari. As if looking at him would give him Yahvi's truth. He frowned when he saw a woman and two kids join him. They'd come from the washroom. Mr Kothari asked the woman if they should leave. The woman nodded and they went out. It seemed like they

were his family members. Like he was the man of the family. But how could that be possible?

Could a man get married again within a week of his wife's death and have kids as well? It was not possible, unless they weren't his kids. Or the woman wasn't his wife.

As the four went out, a hunch made Garv stand up. He called Nihira on her phone and told her that something urgent had come up and he had to go to office. He asked her to finish her lunch and wait for him at the cafe. He then followed Mr Kothari, who, along with the woman and kids, got into a car and drove for a bit before entering the gates of a posh colony.

Garv was stopped at the gate but he pretended to be Mr Kothari's guest and said he was following his car. The security guard looked him up and down and seemed convinced. He let him in. Garv parked his car and quickly followed Mr Kothari, who entered one of the buildings with the woman and kids in tow. Their camaraderie told him they were a family. Inside the building,

he saw them get into one of the elevators. Garv took the stairs. He ran up and waited at every floor to check if the elevator doors opened.

Finally, it stopped on the fifth floor. Garv was huffing and puffing as he saw the man, followed by the kids and the woman, walk towards flat number 504. Mr Kothari unlocked the door himself.

The odds told Garv that it was his flat. Once his breathing was normal, Garv went and stood in front of the door. A couple of contemplative seconds later, he pressed the doorbell. One of the kids opened the door almost immediately.

'Is Mr Singh at home?' Garv asked a random question as he looked inside curiously. As if he would find Yahvi there. The kid said, 'No. My daddy's name is Sukesh Wadhwani.'

Garv apologized and the kid closed the door.

He was now convinced that Yahvi's husband had another family. But that was not all. He'd seen something else that piqued his curiosity even more. A

huge painting in Mr Kothari's living room. He opened his Instagram and checked

Yahvi's profile. He was right. Her third post was a picture of her standing in a bathrobe, smiling at the camera, with the same painting in the background.

9

6 October 2018

Since the last time we met, our relationship had gone through a few changes. We'd sexted several times. I don't really know how it started.

I didn't plan it. Nor did she, I guess.

I remember she'd put up a WhatsApp story of her working out at home. In the video she had posted, she was doing squats. I'd commented on her shapely legs. Honestly, I had been a bit hesitant initially. Complimenting someone on their body is a lame way of telling them: 'I wish I could fuck you.' I didn't want to sound unimaginative.

And I didn't want to be 'just another guy'

saying 'the obvious thing'. And yet I did message her about her shapely legs.

Her response was: *Don't tell me you had imagined*

them. Haha.

I replied: *Guilty.*

She replied: *What else are you guilty of?*

That was it. Before I knew it we were texting what we wanted to do to each other's privates.

I was definitely masturbating while typing.

Maybe she was too. Maybe not. She told me her husband was sleeping beside her while she was sexting me. I think it aroused her. The forbidden always arouses the mind and prepares it for guilty pleasures. This wasn't the first time I'd sexted, though.

There were times when I felt horny while Nihira was in Bengaluru and simply watched porn to relieve myself. I even became a premium member of a few adult websites. Then came a time when watching porn and jerking off became monotonous and boring. I wanted more. Maybe something real. But I was also sure I wouldn't do it for real. I loved Nihira. I was simply not comfortable having sex with someone with whom I didn't have any emotional connection.

I had this colleague in office, our CFO, Pravin Sahu. He was all about sex: his jokes, his experiences, even his philosophies. Every two months he would visit Bangkok where he would book prostitutes for varied sexual escapades and come back and narrate his experience with such elan, as if he had won the presidential election of some country. He always used to try to persuade me to accompany him. But for some reason I never felt comfortable about paying for sexual intimacy. I didn't think it was ethical. Not that I judged Pravin for it. Maybe it made him happy.

It sure gave a lot of people employment, which was good. Though I didn't go to Bangkok, I did download a few dating apps, as suggested by him, where I'd these sexting experiences. I even met a few women but realized they were completely different in reality. It never went beyond a single meeting, till I met Yahvi at the airport.

And the rest was ...

The next day, when we spoke on the phone, I thought she would want to discuss it. The

experience. But she didn't. I too didn't bring it up. I thought talking about it might make her uncomfortable. Maybe she didn't like to talk about sex. Most of us are like that. We do certain things and then bury them in the deepest corners of our mind. That night we again indulged in sexting. This time she started it by telling me that she was surprised by my cyber

prowess; by the way I captured my erotic thoughts in sentences and the GIFs I chose (thanks, Google). The sexting continued till we both climaxed.

And now we were meeting at The Pavilion again. I'd come with the presumption that we were not supposed to talk about our sexting sessions. They were tantamount to those dark things we did within the four walls of our abodes. The things we weren't supposed to talk about once we were outside. But the first thing she said was, 'I'm feeling so damn shy. I've never done this before.' She didn't even look at me when we met on the first floor of the mall. I shrugged. There was a moment of awkwardness.

Why hadn't she said anything about it during our last meeting?

'Other than my husband, I've never met a man after telling him about my sexual fantasies,'

she clarified. I found this somewhat cute.

'Well, you have now,' I said, hoping she would bring up the fact that this wasn't the first time we were meeting after sexting for half the night.

I also took pride in the fact that I was the only guy she had been with after marriage. Male ego is a strange thing. It's always hungry and needs to be constantly fed. The fact that a married woman had felt attracted to me made me feel like a winner. Of what? I wasn't exactly sure.

'Are you taking any medicines for your throat?' I asked her as we walked towards the shops.

'What do you mean? That's how my voice is,' she said. I honestly thought she had a sore throat till then.

'I'm so sorry.'

'A husky voice isn't good, no?' she asked.

'I didn't mean that. I just wanted to know for how long I would get to hear this sexy voice.'

Now that I know it's permanent, I can live in peace.' I tried tongue-in-cheek humour to lighten the mood. She gave me a look and said,

'Nothing is ever permanent, mister.'

We settled for ice cream this time instead of coffee.

'Tell me something,' she began, 'Does this ever happen with you that you meet someone, get attracted to them and then wonder how it would

feel to be a part of their daily life?'

'Someone as in?'

'As in anybody. Some random person. A stranger. Ummm, for example,' she looked around and spotted a group of girls, 'how about that one in black trousers?' I followed her gaze.

'She is attractive enough,' she said and continued,

'Now think what it would be like to be with her; to live with her. Here she looks all tiptop, but think how careless she must be in her own space. Is she someone who wraps her towel

around her head or around her bosom after a bath? Is she wild or mild in bed? Is she a good homemaker? Is she a bohemian soul? Would she complain if you hit her or would she accept domestic violence as one of those things men do and women bear stoically? Does she snore when she sleeps? Is she capable of committing a crime?'

'Whoa, wait a second. I don't do that.' I found it a bit weird. Why would anyone imagine so many things about a person they didn't even know? I suddenly remembered what she had told me about imagining babies with unattractive men when we had first met. I must say Yahvi had some odd preferences.

'But I do. I simply love doing it. To belong to someone in my own imaginary world. Like I have realities in my head with people I know and alternate realities with the ones I don't know.'

The way she said it made it sound interesting.

'Like what?' I asked, slurping up ice cream from the cone. She wiped away a speck of ice

cream from her nose and said, 'Like in one of those alternate realities, I'm your wife.'

I paused and fixed my eyes on her, asking for an explanation.

'When you message me in the morning, I wonder what it would be like if I got you that cup of coffee which you now prepare yourself.

When you call me from office, I wonder what it would be like if the lunch you were eating was prepared by me. When we ... ' she chose her words carefully, 'text each other those things'

you know, I wonder what it would be like if we were instead whispering those things into each other's ears. What would it be like if our fingers weren't on our phones but on our ... ' her voice trailed away.

'But you know that's not possible, right?' I asked. I only wanted to be clear with her that I was not single if she'd already forgotten it. I too was married like her.

'That's why I just imagine these things. Because it's impossible. Possible things rarely make

it to anyone's list of desires,' she said between noisy slurps.

That was true. We always have a thing for the unachievable. What was I doing meeting a married woman whom I'd sexted a few times? That made me think a little. It wasn't like I was done with Nihira. I loved her. I had no complaints.

It was true that it was difficult to be in a long distance marriage but you couldn't have everything.

And it was our choice. Nihira and I were sure we would pull our marriage through it. I wondered what Nihira did when she was horny.

Was she also hooking up on dating apps? Nihira was an attractive woman. I had noticed men

'checking her out'. I felt both proud and insecure when this happened. But I had unfaltering trust in Nihira. I was sure she wouldn't intentionally do anything that would jeopardize our marriage.

Nor would I.

As Yahvi and I walked around chit-chatting, the thought remained with me. And by the time we reached the basement parking to get to our

respective cars and go home, I understood why I was with her. My relationship with Nihira had become mechanical. And because things were static between us, certain things had also turned static within. Marriage normalizes a lot of things. Like I would have never sexted Nihira even if we were horny. Because she was my wife.

Because we weren't strangers. In fact, there was relaxed familiarity between us. We were still interested *in* each other but were not interesting *to* each other. There was nothing new to discover.

Or maybe there was but monotony had

made us overlook it. But Yahvi was interesting to me, unknown to me. Thus, she seemed like an adventure. Adventure! That's what man gets drawn to viscerally.

Yahvi and I hugged, after which she walked towards her car. I got into my car and got busy on my phone. I looked up when I heard a sudden knock at the window. It was Yahvi. I rolled down the window and asked, 'What happened?'

'You want to know how I feel about you?' she

asked. I could see the lust in her eyes, and her voice was sultry. I nodded. She thrust something into my hand, something soft, and then quickly walked away. I didn't open my fist till I saw her car drive out of the parking lot. I was a tad taken aback with this abrupt behaviour.

I had her thong in my hand. It was a tiny one.

It was wet. I could clearly imagine her wearing it. Something within that imagination told me that my life was going to change. The kind of change that spring brings and not winter. My male ego was doing salsa.

10

PRESENT

Nihira had already paid for the meal and was waiting when Garv returned to the cafe.

'I'm really sorry,' he said.

'It's okay. I understand, work is important,'

she said. Garv's guilt made him say, 'I am done with work for the day. I will go to office only after you have left. Let's go and shop now?'

'Shop?' Nihira was taken aback. She held Garv

by his chin and turned his face around.

'My husband of eight years who hates even entering stores wants to shop?'

Garv looked at her guiltily. The shopping part was because of Yahvi. He'd met her so many times during her shopping sprees that it had become a habit.

'So what?' Garv asked. 'You need such surprises to keep an eight-year-long marriage going.'

'I'm impressed. But sweetheart, I don't think the stores would be open right now,' she said, glancing at her watch, and then added, 'Let's go home, shower and come out again with my luggage.'

That sounded more practical.

'And then we shop till I see you off?' Garv asked.

'Sure.'

Once home, Nihira headed straight for a shower, while Garv made an excuse and went to the other wing where Yahvi had lived with the

guy he'd tracked to another gated community, whose name was apparently Sukesh. The old nameplate was still there.

'Sir, are you looking for someone?' the guard asked.

'This is Mr Kothari's ... ' Garv started but was cut short.

'He doesn't live here. He lives in London,' the guard said.

'Then who was living here till now? There was a death ... ' Before Garv could finish, the guard spoke again.

'Yes, a couple was living here on rent. The woman died.'

'The Wadhwanis?' Garv asked. The guard seemed confused. Just then, Garv's phone rang.

It was Nihira.

'Where are you?' she asked.

'Coming right up!' Garv said and left. The guard was still lost in thought.

When Nihira opened the door, Garv said, 'I thought I would get a haircut but there was

such a long queue.'

Nihira rolled her eyes before going to the bedroom to get ready. Within the hour, they left with Nihira's luggage.

They went to a couple of malls from where Nihira not only shopped for herself but also for him. Garv noticed how different Nihira and Yahvi's choices were. Yahvi usually bought dresses, while Nihira preferred trousers and shirts. Maybe that was because, Garv thought, Nihira was a working professional. She couldn't possibly wear dresses when talking to crime victims.

There was a stark difference between their colour choices too. Yahvi loved pastels while Nihira usually picked out bold, solid colours. *Why was he comparing them?* They were different people with different preferences.

After seeing Nihira off at the airport, Garv headed to his office. After he had settled down with a cup of black coffee, he checked Yahvi's Instagram profile. Maybe it was a coincidence.

Perhaps this painting was displayed in more

than one place. It was possible. But then, Sukesh and Yahvi had clearly known each other, so there was a possibility that the painting in her photo was the same one he had spotted in his house. Moreover, if Sukesh was her husband then what was he doing at that other flat? The kid had clearly told him he was his father. Why was he living in a rented apartment with Yahvi?

The questions made him realize something. The name on her Instagram profile was just Yahvi.

There was no surname. And going by what the security guard had told him, she wasn't Mrs Kothari-the London-based landlord's wife. But why had she introduced herself as Yahvi Kothari then? Or had she thought he would harm her in some way and that's why she hid her real identity? There were just too many questions, and the obvious answers unsettled him because somewhere they hinted that he had been fooled.

But he wanted to be totally sure before forming an opinion about Yahvi.

The fourth Instagram post was a video of her

doing squats in a gym. Garv didn't remember her telling him about joining a gym. The WhatsApp story which she'd posted once, which had led to their sexting, had been shot at home. But by now he had an inkling that Yahvi hadn't been completely honest with him. The post mentioned the name of the gym: Anytime Fitness.

He tapped on it and Google Maps located it for him. If someone lived on Park Road, why would they gym in Shivaji Nagar? It made absolutely no sense.

In the evening, before going home, Garv drove to Anytime Fitness. It wasn't about things in Yahvi's story not adding up any more. It was about who Yahvi really was. And why she had fooled him, if at all. He pursed his mouth into a smirk, thinking that he didn't even know the woman he had fallen madly in love with, for whom he had been ready to leave his wife.

Garv was stopped at the reception of the gym.

The woman behind the desk asked him if he wanted to join. Garv nodded. He was about to

speak when someone called out to him from behind.

It was Anika.

The ones you want to avoid always appear in places where you don't want them to be. If that wasn't one of Murphy's Laws then it should be, Garv thought.

'Hey! What a surprise to see you here,' she said. Garv wasn't ready for her. His reluctance was probably evident in his demeanour because she added, 'Chill, I'm not following you. I'm not a freak.'

'Nothing like that. I just didn't expect you here,' he said.

'Nor did I. Are you here to sign up? Though it doesn't seem like you need it.'

She never lets go of a chance to objectify me, Garv thought.

From the corner of his eye, he noticed that the receptionist was waiting.

'Excuse me,' he told her and turned to Anika again, 'Can we talk for two minutes?'

'Of course,' Anika said excitedly. She'd been

waiting for this moment, for Garv to talk to her outside work, ever since she had joined the company a year ago.

'I'll be straight. I didn't come here to sign up.'

'Oh, then?'

'My wife wanted to know if someone by the name of Yahvi ever came to this gym.'

Anika frowned.

'Something to do with her NGO. You know she works for an NGO, right?' Garv clarified.

'No, I didn't. It's nice to know that. But what exactly do you want?' Anika asked.

'Could you please see if the gym has any record of a Yahvi signing up? They won't let me see it. I know they may not allow you too but ... '

'They will. The owner is a friend of my ex-husband.

What did you say her name was?'

Garv quickly looked into his phone and showed Anika a picture, saying, 'Yahvi. I'm not sure of her surname.'

'All right, give me a moment,' Anika said.

'I can't thank you enough.'

'You can thank me by taking me out for dinner/'

Anika beamed. Garv responded with a tight smile.

Anika went in, while he stood where he was.

He saw Anika talk to the receptionist and then go behind the desk and type something into the computer. A moment later, she looked up and said, 'Can you please come here?'

As soon as Garv joined her, Anika pointed at a profile on the screen that was sandwiched between a few others. There were three Yahvi is in all. The one Anika was pointing at was *his* Yahvi all right. Garv carefully read her full name: Yahvi Goel. But her address didn't say Park Road. Garv couldn't help but think: Did he know anything about this woman named Yahvi with whom he had wanted to disappear and start a new life?

11

12 October 2018

Honestly, it shouldn't have taken us more than a week to meet again. Especially after what

happened the last time we met. We made three plans in between but cancelled all of them. The third one was cancelled after I had reached the venue where we'd decided to meet.

She said we should watch a movie together.

I booked the tickets and reached the theatre on time. If Nihira ever got to know about this, she would be amazed. I didn't watch films. Neither in theatres nor at home. I know it sounds weird in this Netflix era. But for some reason I couldn't keep track of a story. I always ended up dozing off which irked Nihira (I don't blame her), so we rarely watched movies

together. Earlier, when we were dating, I used to still make an effort, but after marriage I stopped completely. She understood and gave up. With Yahvi, of course, things were slightly different. Nihira would be with me even after the movie. But not Yahvi. I was sure I wouldn't watch the movie. We would chat and be aware of each other's movements. At least I would.

At first, Yahvi asked me to go in and message

her the ticket. Half an hour into the movie and five yawns later, she messaged me saying she wouldn't be able to make it. I wanted to ask her why but all I replied was 'okay'. Did I have the right to ask her 'why'? Her wish, wasn't it? But a few minutes later she herself clarified that her husband was home early from work on account of a headache and she couldn't leave the house.

The first time she had cancelled a plan, she'd told me that her husband had invited some friends over for dinner without any prior intimation and she had to be around to make sure everything was okay. The second time, she got her period and cancelled because she had a stomach ache. I was angry initially. But then I analysed my anger. I had met this woman only a few times and was angry because she had chosen her husband over me? Ego is a funny thing.

And a dangerous thing as well. But the false expectations it begets are even more dangerous. In my mind, I thought, come what may, she would come to meet me. Why? Just because I thought

there was 'something beautiful' between us.

There was something uninhibited between us; something raw and visceral. Anything without a destination is bound to seem beautiful. But for such a connection can someone defy their everyday duties and responsibilities? They can.

But should they? The soul may be bohemian. It may not want to be tied down with rules, but the body seeks an identity in the society, and that identity can't be bohemian. It will always remain caged within the societal definition of it.

And roles reside within that definition. In this case, Yahvi's role was that of someone's wife.

I didn't respond to her message for a day and used the time to calm down. Both of us had stepped out of our normal reality to connect to whatever it was that had brought us together.

Again and again. We couldn't possibly draw a circle of expectations around it. It was beautiful because there were no expectations.

What we had between us needed to be without these things for it to be different. And it was

important to keep it different because the day it became repetitive like our normal lives, both of us would lose the urge and the need to remain glued to it. We wouldn't take any detours from our normal life to meet then.

Today, when I met her, finally, I didn't tell her that I had missed her. Even though I had, but I thought it was better not to tell a person about these things this early. But when she met me at Amanora Mall, outside the elevator in the basement, which would take us from the parking lot to the second floor, she hugged me tightly.

'Fuck, I missed you,' she said.

'I missed you too,' I said as a reflex action. But I meant it as well. And with that hug, all thoughts of restraining myself flew away. We roamed around, talking just like we used to. We had just settled down on one of the benches outside the food court when I noticed a patch on her arm. It looked like a blood clot. I was in two minds over whether to ask her about it or not. It didn't seem like an accidental injury to me. She caught me

staring at it once. But didn't care to explain.

'Do you believe one can fall in love multiple times?' she asked.

I took my time before answering, 'I think so, yeah.'

'Me too. But I also think sometimes people fall in love at an age when it's too late to change.'

'If it doesn't change you, is it love?' I asked softly. The question was not just for her. I was asking myself too.

'I think there's a reason why love is defined as a force of nature by many. Anything that is a product of nature is bound to leave traces; bound to segregate us into before and after. For example, spring. There's a before and after associated with it.'

'And you are saying sometimes we become too rigid to let that force of nature, love, affect us even though we may experience it?'

She nodded and said, 'Because if we change after a certain point in our life, our world changes with us. And we don't always have the

right to change the world. For individuals inhabit that world as well.'

I understood what she was hinting at. And I couldn't agree more.

'You know, Garv, sometimes I think how wonderful it would be if I had an emotional twin.'

'An emotional twin?'

'Someone who would talk when I would, go silent when I would. I would never feel the need for a companion then.' A pause later, she added,

'Finding a companion like that is such an exhausting task though.'

We remained quiet for some time. Then we hugged in the parking lot before saying our goodbyes. But this time it felt different. Neither of us pulled away and remained locked in a deep embrace. After a few minutes, we looked into each other's eyes. There was a sound. I realized she had unlocked her car using her smart key.

The fact that we still had our arms around each other told me she hadn't unlocked it for herself alone. I remembered that last time she

had stuffed her wet thong into my hand, which, quite honestly, I didn't know what to do with once I was home. I did jerk off to it once in the shower but after that I threw it away. I never told her about the jerking off bit.

I felt her body against mine, slowly pushing me towards her car. I knew what was about to happen. I didn't fight it.

'You are my only one after marriage,' she said and, leaning close to my ear, whispered, 'Kiss me on my wound.'

I did. First softly and then passionately. After that, no more words were exchanged. We kissed all the way to the car. Our tongues fought to conquer each other. We sat in the car and she locked the door from inside. It was probably for security. But I interpreted it as 'don't stop at just kissing'.

I sat on the passenger seat and she got on top of me. She started rubbing her pelvis against my groin, giving me a major hard-on. I picked her up by the waist and placed her on the driver's

seat. She thought I was done. I wasn't. I crossed over to the back seat and then extended my hand to help her. We continued to kiss as my hand slid under her dress and caressed her breasts, while she rubbed my penis. I could feel it throb as she massaged it. We sat up facing each other. She unzipped me while I lifted her dress till her waist. I lay back and she turned around to pull down my pants. We didn't plan it but found ourselves in the '69' position. She again started massaging my penis and licking my ball sack. I licked her vaginal lips and then parted them with my fingers. I inserted a finger inside her vagina. She moaned out my name when my finger touched her G-spot.

'Garv!' I felt a stirring in my loins. Her grip tightened around my penis. We satisfied each other orally till we climaxed. Finally, we were done, but none of us moved. I didn't know if it was a good thing that we weren't facing each other. She finally sat up and adjusted her dress.

She then leaned back to grab the tissue box

from the rear deck of the car. I pulled out a few, cleaned myself and then zipped up my trousers.

There was an awkward silence between us.

This was the first time *we* had been intimate, and instead of romantic lovemaking, we had unleashed our bestial impulses. She moved towards the driver's seat, while I stepped out of the car.

I stood by her window. She checked herself in the mirror and then looked at me.

'Do you love me?' she asked.

It was direct. It was abrupt. And it was without preamble. Or maybe we didn't need one because of our past meetings?

'Yes,' I blurted out. I didn't know if I really felt it but I was sure a no would make me look like a moron.

'Do you love me more than your wife?' she asked.

That was below the belt.

'Yes.'

I was still somewhat sure of the first yes. Not

the second. The funny thing was, I said it without the slightest pause.

12

PRESENT

Garv had learnt the address by heart. It was in the camp area. He had been there a few times with Nihira. She used to buy books from Solanki Booksellers. It was on Moledina Road, right opposite Coffee House.

On Sunday, he went to the area twice but couldn't go up to the house. What would he see there? What would he discover? What if he found out something that completely destroyed what he thought of Yahvi? A fear had crept in.

With Yahvi gone, he wanted to desperately hold on to whatever he believed was true. And yet curiosity made him want to look beyond that.

For Yahvi wasn't just another woman. She was the one for whom he had been ready to let go of some very important things. Nihira was one of them. Yahvi had challenged his deep-rooted

perceptions of life. She had, with her presence, taught him that there was more to life than he thought. At thirty, Garv had become resigned to the monotony of routine. He was convinced that from where he was, it would be the same thing every day. Yahvi was not only his way of escaping the humdrum, but someone who had opened his mind to new vistas. It was like he had been living in a room which had only one window named Nihira. And then he discovered a door named Yahvi.

After finishing his morning meetings in office, he went out for a smoke. Anika accompanied him. She lit her cigarette and after taking a few puffs said, 'Time to fulfil your promise.' Her eyes twinkled with mischief. As if the fish had finally caught the bait. And he knew what she meant by 'fulfil your promise'

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'Sure/ Garv said with a nod.

'I've booked a room in Conrad,' she said. Garv threw her a puzzled glance.

'Shit, did I say room? I meant a table. I've booked a table at Kahana in Conrad. Hope you don't mind.'

The last part, Garv understood, was just a formality. Anika wouldn't let this opportunity go. He wasn't sure how to define Anika. He knew she had the hots for him. And because he knew it, he had no interest in her even though

he had overheard his employees in the smoking zone and the men's washroom discuss her physique and the things they wanted to do to her. He had never participated in these discussions because they made him uncomfortable but he had never asked them to stop either. According to them, she was the hottest female specimen they had ever seen. He was sure they would jump at the opportunity to go out with her. To fuck her. And then boast about fucking the hottest woman in office to their colleagues. He knew Anika would sleep with him anytime, or at least that's what her body language suggested, and yet he never took her seriously.

'It's perfectly fine. A deal is a deal,' he said, smiling at her.

'Just my luck,' she said. He appreciated the fact that Anika didn't question him about Yahvi beyond what he'd told her.

After finishing their cigarettes, they both returned to their desks. He met Anika again for a meeting a couple of hours later. To his relief, she behaved professionally, without giving anyone a hint that they were supposed to meet for a casual dinner later in the evening. Garv always loathed people who indulged in small talk and the ones who unwittingly allowed such people fodder.

Garv went home after office, showered and talked to Nihira for a good one hour. This had not happened in the last several months when he had Yahvi in his life. It's hard to forget the habits that you form when you are in a relationship.

What are you supposed to do with those hardwired habits when the people you love go away? Back then, his schedule was completely

different. He was either with Yahvi or talking to her on the phone. Now, with her gone, he didn't know what to do after coming back from office. He sometimes poured himself a glass of his favourite wine, lit a cigarette and listened to their conversations that he had recorded on his phone. He'd never deleted them. And now whenever he played them on his woofers, a feeling of forlornness washed over him. It was almost like they were together again.

He also kept searching for clues in the conversations.

Maybe she had hinted at something

back then but he had missed it altogether.

Garv, in his hour-long talk with Nihira, didn't tell her that he was going out for dinner with Anika. He just said he had a business dinner to attend. Nihira didn't ask any more questions and he didn't clarify either. Though he did wonder if Nihira did the same with him. And if so, did he have a right to be angry with her? Not any more. Sometimes it was better to presume things about your partner rather than let the

knowledge of certain truths manipulate your emotions.

A little later, while getting dressed, he looked at himself in the mirror. He realized he had dressed like he used to for his dates with Yahvi.

He quickly changed into a causal T-shirt from the shirt he was wearing. And opted for jogger jeans over the trousers he had earlier picked out.

A feeling of deja vu gripped him as he stepped inside Conrad. He'd been there quite a few times with Yahvi in the last couple of months. Though they had never dined at Kabana, where Anika was waiting for him.

She was wearing a thigh-length maroon dress with a plunging neckline that showed off her ample cleavage. A sparkling diamond necklace adorned her neck. Garv couldn't help but think how gorgeous she looked. As she came forward and hugged him, he caught a whiff of her perfume.

'Am I allowed to blush like a teenager?' Anika asked the moment they settled down opposite

each other.

'Well ... ' Garv didn't know what to say.

'I'll take that as a yes. I'm so thankful to your wife for this.'

Garv threw her an incredulous look.

'It was because of her you came to the gym, asking about that woman. And see where it brought us.' She was beaming.

'Indeed.' Garv didn't feel like correcting the story. He opened the menu and began reading it.

'I'll have whatever you are having,' Anika said.

'I want to keep it a little light tonight.'

'Same here.'

Garv raised his hand to call a waiter. After they had placed their order and the waiter had left, Garv didn't know what to talk about. He took a few sips of his water.

'So, you stay alone here?' he asked.

'Yes. My parents live in Delhi.'

'Do they? I didn't know that. Mine too.'

'That's because we have never met outside office. Where do yours live in Delhi?'

'CR Park.'

'Mine were in Rajendra Nagar but they shifted to Naida a couple of years ago.'

'Hmm.'

'Living alone can be quite dreary,' she said. It sounded like a loaded statement to Garv.

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'It can be. But these days there are so many things to distract yourself with.'

'Dating apps, you mean?'

'That's one of them.'

'Not that I haven't used them. Met many men as well. But nobody stayed, you know what I

mean.'

Garv looked at her questioningly.

'I mean this loneliness isn't situational. It's more a state of the soul, right. You can hook up only for a short period of time. I want to be with someone with whom I can cuddle up, and revel in his thoughts when he isn't with me.'

'True,' Garv said, thinking that's what had happened when Yahvi came into his life. She stayed, deep within, even when she wasn't with him physically.

Their dinner arrived. They indulged in meaningless banter as they ate it. While having dessert, Anika suddenly spoke up, 'I forgot to tell you one thing. Rohit was asking about the woman you were inquiring about.'

'Huh?' Garv couldn't make the connection.

'Sorry.' Anika realized her mistake. She clarified,

'So, Rohit is a gym trainer at Anytime Fitness.

You came looking for that woman, right? I forgot her name.'

'Yahvi.'

'Right, Yahvi.'

'What was he asking?'

'Apparently she was training with him. So he was asking who you were and about your connection with Yahvi. I didn't say much.'

Why would a gym trainer ask so many questions?

There was something that didn't seem right.

Garv wondered.

'If you don't mind, may I have his full name and picture?' Garv asked. Anika picked up her phone, tapped on it a few times and then held it in front of Garv's face.

'That's Rohit Jadhav, the gym trainer. And that's his WhatsApp DP.'

Garv wasn't looking at Rohit's face. He was staring at the coffee mug he was sipping from in the picture. Garv had a feeling he had seen it somewhere. He picked up his phone.

'Excuse me,' he said and opened the Instagram app to go to Yahvi's profile. One of her photos had two coffee mugs which had the king and queen of hearts imprinted on them. The one

with the king looked exactly like Rohit's mug in his WhatsApp display picture.

13

15 October 2018

What happened in those two hours, right after we checked into room number 102 7 of Hotel Conrad in Koregaon Park, had never happened before in my life. The room was a complete mess and our bodies messier. I had numerous scratches and bite marks all over my body, and she too had

been marked with several hickeys. When she went to the washroom, I could see the redness on her butt. I didn't remember how many times I spanked it.

I'd never done this to Nihira. Or with her. Such dirty sex. Such animalistic behaviour. Such complete surrender to sexual temptation. Suddenly the orgasmic bliss was replaced by guilt.

To be honest, I didn't get into this with Yahvi for sex. Even though it eventually led to that. I don't think I was ever the kind of person who sought sex outside marriage. Let's not get into

the moral argument of it. I never felt like it. I was happy with whatever and whenever Nihira and I had it. But after she shifted to Bengaluru, I realized what I needed was companionship.

Someone who would be there for me whenever I wanted them to. Someone with whom I could do whatever I wanted to without any second thoughts. To share my thoughts, my feelings, my impulses, my quietude and my chaos. Sex was a part of that need but not the whole for sure. Not for me.

Yahvi came out of the washroom after some time, wearing a bathrobe. She seemed to have taken a bath as she looked fresh. Her hair was dry though. On second thoughts it was probably a post-coital glow. For some reason, she wasn't looking at me. She picked up her bag and fumbled inside it for a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. She lit one and took a long drag.

'You smoke?' I asked. And realized it sounded more of a how-could-you-not-have-told-me kind of allegation. She glanced at me. Maybe it

did sound like an allegation after all.

'I like to smoke after sex,' she said, drawing the curtains and taking in the view of the city. I got up from the bed and went and stood next to her, stark naked, and took her cigarette. She didn't stop me but threw me an incredulous look.

'I will smoke what you smoke, when you smoke,' I said, taking a puff, but the smoke made me cough. She couldn't stop her laughter. I didn't know

then that smoking would be one of those habits she would gift to me.

'Someone died the day before,' she said. I wasn't ready for this sudden change of topic.

'Who?'

'If I'd told my husband this, he would have asked: "So?" But you asked "who". It shows your interest in people. I like that,' she said between puffs and added, 'I don't know the person. Someone in the colony. Someone who died too soon.'

His wife was crying while people were lamenting about how untimely the death was.'

I still didn't know where this was going.

'And then I wondered, just like a person can die untimely, so can a relationship, right? But we realize it much later. By then a few years of our life have already been wasted. What then?'

'I guess letting the experience grow inside us, allowing it to alter us and moving on is the only way.' Somehow, her thought was worth a thought.

'Allowing it to alter us? An experience is too subliminal to seek our permission. We simply become what affects us. It's like we are a plain desert to begin with, and when someone walks on it, the imprints become a part of our being.'

I didn't respond immediately.

'That's beside the point though,' she said and continued, 'What I meant was, what if you lose your prime years because of a person? Like at first you think the person is worth every bit of your life and then realize he or she is a mistake.'

A blunder maybe. Or maybe not necessarily that. Mistakes and blunders are strong words.

But maybe you simply realize there's nothing
between the person and you. Not even friction.

He is there. You are there. You both inhabit the same space and yet are a thousand light years away from each other. Just like dead people are from the ones who are alive. And no matter what you do, those years won't come back.'

'Basically, what you are saying is that life doesn't give us second chances.'

She looked at me, finished the cigarette and stabbed it in the ashtray. She then came and stood behind me and put her arms around my waist, resting her face on my back.

'I love how you squeeze my paragraphs into one line,' she said and kissed my back.

'And you have expanded the one line of my life into multiple chapters.' I turned around and kissed her forehead. She pulled away and walked towards the couch, picking up an apple from the centre table on the way.

'You choose a comfortable life. But then you arrive at a point when you realize that very comfort has destroyed or wasted your true self. That

all your innate talents or desires went to the gutter because of that one choice of comfort over everything else. Tell me, have you ever felt that?'

'Not me. On the contrary, I've always taken risks. I dropped out of college to become an entrepreneur.

I don't think I've wasted myself.'

'I feel happy to know that. To see someone who didn't fall for the comfort trap. But then that is probably because you are a man. Women, on the other hand, aren't allowed to pursue a journey of their choice. And if they want to, or if they do so, even the roads are marked from beforehand.

They are seldom spared if they choose an unconventional road.'

For a long time, we didn't speak. Perhaps we both were lost in our own quietude. I didn't know about her, but I was thinking about what had happened over the last two hours in the room.

'Listen, can we not do this again?' I asked beseechingly.

It was bothering me and I wanted to
get it out of my system. If I had to be dishonest
with her, then I was better off not meeting her.

'Do what?' She came out of her trance.

'Come to a hotel room for sex.' I just put it out there. This had always been a problem with me.

I didn't know how to sugar-coat the truth. I always preferred my truth naked.

'But what if I tell you I'm in it only for this,'

Yahvi said and took a bite of the apple, studying its contours. I understood even she liked her truth naked. And what I realized was that two naked truths together looked damn ugly.

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14

PRESENT

It has to be a coincidence, Garv told himself repeatedly. *I am sure there are many coffee mugs that look alike*, he thought. And yet he couldn't avoid the fact that there was an outside chance that the mug Yahvi had in her post and the one the trainer had in his WhatsApp display picture were the same. If Anika had not told him that the gym trainer had inquired about him, he

would have never cared. And perhaps would have concluded it was all a coincidence. But now Garv had a doubt. He felt impatient to meet the trainer and clear this out once and for all. The only way he could do this without arousing any suspicion was through Anika.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly until Garv and Anika exited Hotel Conrad after dinner. They were waiting for the valet to bring their respective cars. Anika seemed slightly drunk but Garv was totally in control. She was constantly smiling at him. As the valet brought her car, Anika walked up to Garv and hugged him. Garv didn't mind initially for it seemed like a friendly parting hug but when she held on to him, tightening her embrace, he wondered if it would seem too rude if he removed himself from her grasp. She was so close that he could almost smell her breath.

'I really like you, Garv,' she said loudly, attracting glances from passers-by. If he moved his face forward by a few inches, he knew their lips

would brush. He flashed an awkward 'I-don't know-what-to-say' smile.

'I know what the boys say about me in office.'

There was melancholy in her tone.

Garv felt a bit embarrassed when he saw the people who were entering and exiting Conrad glance in their direction.

'Good looks can also be a curse, because then nobody wants to believe there's more to you than your so-called hot body. No-fucking-body.

But I know you are not part of the boys' club in office. You are different,' she said.

'Anika? Will you be able to drive?' Garv asked, changing the topic. He knew she was too drunk.

'I can drive,' she said, even though her eyes were half-closed. By then Garv's car had also come. He asked the valet to take his car back to the parking lot while he, with the help of Anika's valet, put her inside her car

and got behind the wheel. As he drove, he kept asking Anika for her address. She kept zoning out. After he called out her name multiple times, she woke up and gave

him her phone. He noticed that the GPS app was open and the destination put as 'home'. He was relieved.

Garv drove Anika to her apartment building, asked the security guard her flat number and then, taking the keys out of her bag, unlocked the door. He tucked her in, in the presence of the guard, and then closed the door to leave.

r---J

The next day, in office, Garv kept checking Yahvi's Instagram posts. On a hunch, he stood up and went out to the smoking zone. He saw Anika there.

'Look, I'm sorry for last night,' she repeated what she'd messaged him in the morning.

'Forget about that. Here's the thing. I want to know if that gym trainer you told me about knew Yahvi as more than just a client.' Garv's problem was he could never beat around the bush for long. He knew Anika could become suspicious of him and realize he knew Yahvi personally, but he had bigger things to worry about.

Anika looked at him for some time. Then she stubbed her cigarette on the wall behind her and threw the butt into a bin.

'It's pretty obvious there's something personal in it for you, more than what you told me earlier about your wife and all.'

Garv knew she would connect the dots but didn't think she would be this direct about it.

She could object or just refuse to comply with his request, Garv thought.

'But I won't ask why this Yahvi is so important to you. It's none of my business. What I need to know is, if I make it happen, if you get whatever

you want from Rohit, what's in it for me?' Anika asked with such a straight face that Garv was totally lost for words.

'Another dinner?' he asked, hesitantly.

'I knew you won't disappoint me. But at my place this time. I can't thank you enough for bringing me home safely last night. But that's no way of coming to someone's home. Allow me to be the perfect host.'

Garv drew in a deep breath. Whatever you do, there's always some collateral. Rare are those times when you are the collateral of your own choices.

'I'm in but no alcohol,' Garv said, setting the ground rules.

'Oh! All right, no alcohol. Deal,' Anika said with a hint of disappointment in her voice.

'I'm going to the gym in the evening. Rohit will be there. I will talk to him casually and try to squeeze out any information about Yahvi. I will send you a recording.'

'Sounds good.'

'Coming Saturday evening, see you at my place. I'm already excited.'

'Sure. What I want to know is if Yahvi had gifted him that coffee mug which he has in his WhatsApp display picture.'

'All right,' Anika said and went inside.

Garv couldn't focus on anything. Nihira called up the moment he reached home. She sounded excited.

'You know, I met this twenty-year-old boy at my NGO who brought his teenage sister to us because she is suicidal. This boy, his name is Samit, is such a flirt.'

Garv was trying hard to stay interested in what Nihira was telling him but his mind was somewhere else. He was itching to check his WhatsApp to see if Anika had messaged him.

'When I told him I was married, he asked if I would elope with him!' Nihira laughed, adding, 'I told him I was a decade older to him. Guess what he said?'

There was no response from Garv.

'Are you there?' Nihira thought the call had dropped.

'Yeah, yeah I'm there.' Garv realized he had not responded to her earlier question.

'Guess what he said?'

'I ... I don't know.' He actually didn't have a clue what Nihira was talking about.

"He said" ... '

Right then Garv received a ten-minute-long

voice recording from Anika with a message: *I hope this is enough. LMK.*

'Can I please call in half an hour? A work call has come up,' he said earnestly.

'Oh! Okay, sure. I'll wait,' Nihira said. Garv felt bad about lying but he couldn't wait to hear the recording.

He played it. The first few minutes were gibberish.

There was nothing of any importance.

Yahvi's name was mentioned in the fifth minute.

It was evident that Anika was constantly manipulating the conversation to squeeze out more. In the seventh minute, Rohit started talking about Yahvi, saying the coffee mug was a gift from her. That they both were in love with each other and were planning to set up a life together away from here, someplace by a beach. But that was not all. What was said in the ninth minute made Garv's jaws drop.

'One day,' Rohit said on the recording, 'I saw her in a mall with a man. I couldn't see the man properly but something about them told me

that I was being betrayed by Yahvi.'

Garv realized the man Rohit was referring to in the recording was him.

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15

21 October 2018

I must say that was the first awkward moment between us. Not the I don't know what to say kind of awkwardness, but the I hope whatever I say isn't misconstrued kind of awkwardness.

We didn't stay in the hotel room for long after I told her I wasn't in this for sex. She left first. And then I did. Since the room was booked under my name, I had to check out after settling the bill. Even our goodbyes were different. I was a little sceptical to initiate a conversation but was ready to hold one if a word came from her. But the only word that came from her was 'bye'.

After that, only introspection could happen, not conversation.

The incident affected me so much that I couldn't stop thinking about it even during

work hours. I thought I'd offended her with the last thing I said. But was I wrong? One has to tread carefully when it comes to honesty, and it's not about what you say, but how the other person takes it. I made a mental note

to not be totally honest with her in the future. That's how we begin to customize ourselves with every incident, I guess, in a relationship. Were Yahvi and I in a relationship?

I kept waiting to hear my phone buzz, indicating a message or a call from her. I had customized the message alert tone and ringtone for her number, so even without looking at the phone, I would know if it was her. I didn't want to miss even a single call or message from her. I had given her that much importance in my life.

But as more time passed without a call or message from her, the more dejected I felt. Maybe I wasn't that important in her life yet. I'd told her what was on my mind. I wasn't in it for sex.

I wouldn't have waited for serendipity to work its magic if that was the case. I wouldn't have

waited to meet a woman on a flight and then connected with her over coffee if my intention was just to get her to a hotel room. For that there were enough dating apps. In fact, for that I had Anika. I was confident that I could negotiate a no-strings-attached arrangement with her any time. But that was not on my agenda.

Somewhere in my mind I wanted to be with an extension of Nihira. I didn't need a substitute for her. The things I couldn't talk to her about, for whatever reason, I wanted someone to hear them. The emotional excitement I didn't feel when I was with her, I wanted to feel it with someone else. Things I knew about myself but wasn't comfortable sharing with Nihira, I wanted to share with someone else. I know it sounded weird. Why would I feel uncomfortable sharing something with my own wife,

with whom I'd been for so many years? I think the answer was in the question. The way I was used to her being a certain way, I was sure she too was used to me being a certain way. And if

I did something to disturb that 'certain' image, it might be more damaging than healing to our relationship.

What I probably didn't take into account was that sex was an inevitable by-product of every man-woman relationship. Before sleeping that night, I sent Yahvi a 'good night' message. Then I lay awake, waiting for a reply. And when it didn't come, I opened the chat window to see if she came online even for a second. She didn't. She messaged me the next day when I was in office, in the middle of an important client meeting.

He beat me. I'm bruised. Won't be able to meet for a few days.

That's what her message said. For a moment, I was enraged. How could a man hit a woman?

Nihira and I too had had fights. Bad fights. Ugly fights. Fights after which we didn't talk for days.

But we never, even when we were furious, allowed ourselves to think that we could use physical violence to settle old scores; or convinced ourselves that our anger or our marriage gave us

the right to hit the other. Maybe I didn't know a world where such things were allowed ... or should I say were deemed acceptable, so I didn't understand it. What I did understand was an abhorrent social truth: what wasn't allowed might not necessarily be unacceptable.

I had read the message during the meeting itself, but I didn't reply immediately. It wasn't because my ego was bruised by such a late response. I just didn't know if I should respond with an obvious message like: how dare he?

Or should I just say something like: what happened?

Instead, after a number of attempts, I finally wrote: *I'll wait to meet you or for your call.*

With that response, I myself chose a position in her life. I was neither a somebody nor a nobody.

Her call didn't come instantly. When it did, she only had three words to say: Let's meet today? It was a question but I took it as a command.

Call it being romantic or someone's emotional cushion or simply guilt, this time when I met

her I gave her a bouquet of gerberas. I will never forget the smile she flashed me after receiving the flowers. As if she was not expecting them but was happy I had brought them. She hugged me. This hug had a lot of warmth in it. I revelled in it till it lasted.

We were meeting for lunch at Pasha in Marriott. She wanted to have Indian food and I simply went by her wish. The way she kept glancing at the gerberas, I knew they made her feel special.

'Why do we gift flowers knowing they'll die?'

she asked.

'Maybe it's not the flowers. The gift is the fragrance.

For it's the fragrance we remember, and every time we come across it, wherever we may be, it reminds us of that special someone who had introduced us to it,' I tried to philosophize the answer as much as I could. But it was true nonetheless.

'Couldn't agree more,' she said. Our conversation was cut short when the food arrived. She

took a bite of her kulcha and continued, 'Similarly, when we gift ourselves to our partner, we too die for them.'

I was about to dig into my meal when I stopped and looked at her.

'They live with the "fragrance", which is what we are to them. And because they are so sure about who they think we are, they stop discovering us,' she said, taking a sip of the lassi.

'Which leads to our death?' I said, understanding it was metaphorical. What she meant was we stop existing for our partners the moment they 'have' us. *Interesting*, I thought.

'You didn't ask me about the abuse.'

'I thought it was a personal matter.'

'If it was then I wouldn't have mentioned it.'

She had a point. I suddenly felt guilty.

'How are you, Yahvi?' I asked.

'Physically healed. But emotionally ... tell me, Garv, how does one heal emotionally?'

I thought for a second before I said, 'Maybe with time?'

She nodded and said, 'With time we only get used to the injuries. But that doesn't mean they have healed.'

'Then?' I realized she'd asked me a question, and I had replied with one of my own.

'It heals when we don't give it much importance.'

'Distraction is a good option.'

'But how do you distract yourself?'

She didn't answer but quietly ate her lunch. I understood she needed some space. It was clear all this wisdom was coming from her thinking about her relationship with her husband. And I was still not sure how much I should probe. I let silence be our language. She finally spoke when I was paying the bill.

'Why do you think we have been meeting, Garv?' she asked.

Distraction, I answered in my mind, but I wasn't sure if I should say that aloud.

'Your hesitation was an answer,' she said.

It was time for me to head to office while she said she had to go to the salon. While we were

going down in the elevator, she asked me: 'They say sex is the first phase of a relationship. After which phase two begins. Are you ready for our phase two?' She sounded like she knew what phase two had in store.

I didn't. I was happy with the fact that she had kind of accepted what I was pondering upon.

That we were in a relationship.

16

PRESENT

Though Garv had visited Anika's place a few nights ago, it seemed unfamiliar since he hadn't looked around much then. Now when he entered, like a highly anticipated guest, he was welcomed with a warm embrace, which, in Garv's opinion, needn't have been so intimate.

Anika wasn't dressed up like the other night. She was in her pyjamas but Garv couldn't help but notice how figure-hugging the pair was.

'I thought we could keep it casual tonight,' she said.

'Your party, your rules,' Garv said and settled

down on the couch.

He noticed there were a lot of wind chimes and elements of feng shui all around. There were very few pieces of furniture, which made the space look bigger than it was. He also noticed light fittings of all shapes and sizes dangling from the ceiling. There were more designer ones on the walls. Not

all of them were on, but one could easily tell that Anika had a thing for lights.

'I like mood lighting. I put them on according to my mood so that I don't feel lonely,' she said, noticing the look of curiosity on his face. Garv smiled at her, amazed at how people always found ways to associate life with inanimate objects.

Lonely people, he corrected himself.

After a few minutes of more small talk, Garv felt restless. He wasn't here only because Anika had shared the recording with him, as the deal had been initially.

After Garv had heard the recording multiple times, careful to not miss out any detail, he was sure Rohit Jadhav knew Yahvi personally. And

now he wanted to know more. Especially since Rohit was talking about him in the recording as well.

The next day, Garv had asked Anika if she could also invite Rohit over for dinner. Anika had looked a bit surprised. He could have met Rohit somewhere else, but he wanted Anika to be around because he didn't want to arouse any suspicion. Anika had taken a few seconds to think and then beamed. With that, Garv knew that there would be more meetings.

'Fine with me. I'll invite Rohit for dinner, but he will drink. I know he likes to.'

'Even though he's a gym trainer?'

'When the alcohol is free ... ' Anika clarified.

'Hmm. Sounds good then.'

'Yes. You can get whatever information you want from him. But if I do this for you, you have to take me shopping on Sunday.'

There! The fact that Anika didn't even put it as a question or a request told Garv that the formality they had initially maintained given their

professional relationship was a thing of the past.

He had agreed.

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And now he was in her living room, waiting for Rohit to turn up.

'Come, let me show you my flat,' Anika said.

Garv wasn't very interested but he complied.

She took him to her kitchen, her balcony and then her bedroom.

'This is where you had put me the other night,'

she said, eyeing the bed. And then added, 'I wish I was awake.'

Garv gave her an awkward smile, desperate to go back to the living room. He was saved by the doorbell. Anika hid her displeasure behind a tight smile as she walked out reluctantly. Garv found it amusing as he followed her to the living room and made himself comfortable on the couch.

'Who the fuck asked you to be here this early?'

Anika said after opening the door.

'It was my thirst for free alcohol, madam.'

It was Rohit. He spoke English with a heavy Punekar accent. He stepped in but stopped after seeing Garv, who seemed slightly uncomfortable.

He knew Rohit had seen him earlier but hoped he wouldn't recognize him.

'Hey, I'm Rohit,' he said, extending his hand.

Garv, a bit relieved, shook his hand. He didn't tell him his name, Rohit didn't care to ask either.

Anika and Rohit got busy talking, but Garv sat away, keeping an eye on him. The way he was sitting, with his legs wide open and hands flung across the couch, told him he wasn't a man of

poise or etiquette. He proved it himself when he went to the bar and came back with a bottle of whiskey. Garv also understood that Anika and he were buddies.

Anika understood Garv wasn't really enjoying himself, but then, it had been his idea to invite Rohit. She excused herself and took Garv to the balcony.

"Won't he feel awkward that we are here while he is inside alone?" Garv asked.

'Are you kidding me? Didn't you see him? He is here only for the alcohol. I'd invited him for a house party once. He chose a corner and kept drinking till one of my friends kicked him out.'

Anika laughed out loud.

Garv couldn't help but wonder how someone like Rohit could be friends with someone like Yahvi. She had so much class, finesse and panache. How on earth did she even tolerate someone like him?

After half an hour, when Garv saw that Rohit had finished more than half the bottle, he

turned to Anika and said, 'I think we should go inside. We need to ask him about Yahvi. If he drinks more, he will be too sloshed to talk.'

Anika peeped in. And then, turning to Garv, said, 'Okay, let's go in. You be quiet. Let me talk to him first. You can message me your questions, and I will ask him casually.'

'Sounds good.'

Garv and Anika went inside. He again settled down on the couch while Anika sat beside Rohit.

'Are you okay? You are drinking like one of those forlorn lovers,' she said. Garv was impressed by how she started the conversation.

Ro hit glanced at her as if trying to understand what she meant, then turned to his glass and finished his drink. He kept the glass on the table with a loud thud.

'Easy!' Anika said.

'It went on for some time but ended in betrayal.

But till it lasted, it was heavenly,' Rohit drawled.

Anika stole a furtive glance at Garv. She knew what to say next.

'What lasted for some time?' she asked.

'My love story!' he said exasperatedly. Garv immediately took out his phone and sent a message to Anika: *With?*

She read the message and asked, 'With?'

'Yahvi,' Rohit said. Garv felt like he missed a heartbeat. No way could a woman like Yahvi be involved with a guy like Rohit. He wasn't being judgemental. He was being realistic.

How did you meet her? Garv messaged Anika which she repeated to Rohit.

'I was her trainer. I found her attractive from day one. So I added her to the WhatsApp group we have for all my clients. We came close during one of our group outings,' Rohit said, making himself another drink.

Group outing? Garv messaged Anika but she answered the question herself: *Each trainer has a group of people he trains individually, which sometimes meets outside as well. I too have been part of such a group.*

How close were you to Yahvi? Garv messaged.

Anika posed the question.

'I made love to her eight times,' Rohit said with a smile as if he was reliving those memories.

The answer made Garv's insides burn. He went blank for a few seconds. He knew Anika was looking at him expectedly but he was unable to respond.

Garv stood up suddenly, saying, 'Excuse me, I'm not feeling well. I'll call you later, Anika.'

Need to leave.' He scampered towards the main door, with Anika in tow. She didn't know what had happened suddenly and seemed concerned.

As Garv opened the main door to step out, he heard Rohit blabber something.

'We would have got married soon, if she wasn't killed.'

Garv's grip on the doorknob tightened. He froze. *Would have got married soon ... If she wasn't killed. Married soon. Killed.*

17

25 October 2018

What was phase two of a relationship? I wondered after going home. I started analysing Nihira and my relationship. Going by what Yahvi had said, that phase one ended when two people had sex, our phase one had ended a long time ago. In fact, five weeks after we met.

But that situation was different. We had professed our love for each other. And we knew we were the one for the other. That one person with whom we wanted to seek the proverbial forever and ever. It was there in her eyes. It was there in my body language, for it was there in my heart.

Now when I think back, with time, the fear of her going away, the possibility of her leaving me has faded. There's an assurance that she will remain with me, make up with me, no matter what. Vice versa, probably.

It's a good thing, if you think about it. But the human mind works in weird ways. More often than not, we start taking our partners for granted. Their entire being is limited to what we think of them. Based on that, we convince ourselves that there's no

room for any more surprises. And that there's no spark. That's when the mind shuts off. You stop looking forward to spending time together or expecting anything from your partner because it all seems colourless, unexciting. A sense of monotony sets in. It's like attending a magic show. The first time, you are intrigued. The second time, it entertains you. The third time, it's obvious. The fourth time, it gets monotonous.

The fifth time, you are bored to death. The sixth time onwards, even if you are in the magic show physically, your mind wanders off to look for a different magic.

At least that's what happened between Nihira and me. The more we interacted, the less I talked about things she wasn't interested in. It was like I was a piece of cloth, and with every meeting of ours, I was cutting myself to fit her. But what about the pieces I let go of? Those were also a part of me. I am sure she must have done the same. What about those parts we leave out because they don't fit our partners or relationships?

And what if, in the future, we find someone who fits in the 'left out' pieces?

It happens even now. For example, Nihira doesn't like being interrupted when she is talking about problems at work. Earlier, I used to cut in and ask questions. This used to really piss her off. There was a time when we used to fight on Sundays because I would refuse to bathe. It doesn't happen any more, even though I still don't bathe on Sundays. Perhaps she got used to it, or maybe she understood that I won't change.

She doesn't like a creased bed sheet. It hardly matters to me. But since I know she doesn't like it, I make it a point to keep the bed neat and the obvious. But that had no meaning any more since we both lay naked in bed.

'Nothing,' I said.

'You give too much importance to sex, don't you?' she asked.

So she knew what I wanted to talk about.

'Maybe I do. Is that a problem?'

'It will be at some point in time.'

'Okay, I have two questions for you,' I said. I had wanted to ask her these during a phone call or texting session but neither had happened since our last meeting.

'First, what did you mean when you said you were in it only for the sex?'

There was silence.

'Should I answer this first or wait for your second question?' she asked.

'Answer this first.'

'I believe sex is the glue for relationships like this. It doesn't have to be the most important thing between us. We didn't jump into the bed the day we met. We took our time. And that time perhaps made us comfortable enough to consider the option of booking a hotel room.

That's one part of the truth.'

'What's the other?' I asked.

'That without it, I don't think we'll last.'

'And you want us to last?'

'If I didn't, I would have spent more time on dating apps than talking or meeting you.'

'Hmm.' She had a point. Okay, it was time for my second question: 'What's the second phase of a relationship?'

'The realization that,' she paused to do air quotes and added, 'this relationship is under our control now and nothing can go wrong.'

'And sex is a curtain-raiser to this phase?'

'We have been brought up to perceive sex like an event. I should say we have been conditioned to treat it like one because we don't have sex the moment we are born, the way we begin our other basic activities. But come to think of it, it's the most obvious and natural thing ever.'

After some time, Yahvi got up and went to the washroom while I wore my clothes and went and sat on the couch. She had got me thinking.

She was still naked when she came out. 'There's only one life, true, but in that one life you can be part of many stories. And in each of those stories, you'll find an opportunity to live several lives.'

A frown appeared on my face. I didn't fully

understand what she meant.

'What if I ask you to come with me, Garv?'

Leave everything. Leave your story. Create one with me. Give yourself a chance to live another life within this one. What will your answer be?'

It was a proposition. Till then, I was looking ahead to an intimate friendship, hopefully a long one, with Yahvi. With this, I understood she was looking at something way more serious, way more rooted and with ramifications. Something that would rattle my world and hers. Even though we hadn't known each other for long, the intensity we felt when together was enough to at least consider such a proposition, or so I tried to argue with myself.

Before answering, I tried to gauge whether she was joking or serious. Or was it some sort of a trick question? I got nothing.

PRESENT

His mind seemed like a video player which had been hijacked by one particular video. And it was playing on loop. Every time it ended, only to restart again, Garv told himself he should have left Anika's place five minutes earlier. Before Rohit had uttered those words.

When Garv heard Rohit blurt out the last part

-we would have got married soon-he couldn't help but close the door and walk back to where Rohit was sitting. This time he sat close to him, as if he was his buddy, making him a fresh drink and listening to him intently. But he was actually readying himself to interrogate Rohit in the most casual manner possible. Garv wasn't sure what he should question him about first.

Rohit had blurted out two important pieces of information. First, Yahvi and Rohit had planned to get married. It sounded absurd. And second, Yahvi had been killed. This came as a shock. Till then Garv thought she'd died of some disease.

Something somewhere wasn't adding up. And one thing he had learnt from his favourite subject

in school-mathematics-was that when a sum didn't add up, one should start solving it from the beginning again. He had to confirm if Rohit was talking about *his* Yahvi. Garv knew he was, but he still wanted to reconfirm. He took out his phone and showed Rohit her picture.

Rohit immediately took the phone in his hand and, holding it close to his chest, repeated that he missed her.

Garv wanted to know the details, especially the timeline of their relationship. He wanted to believe she had met Rohit before him. But then why had she lied to him that he was the only one after her marriage? Did she say that to everyone?

Why would someone do that? Garv wanted an answer but realized he wasn't brave enough emotionally to hear it. So he left Anika's place abruptly after

that.

The next morning, Garv left his house and went to the well-kept children's park within DFL Enclave, which also had a cemented jogging track. A part of the park had a playing area for

kids, and on the other side there were bamboo huts in which people practised yoga. Garv sat on one of the concrete benches along the track, watching the kids who huddled together on the grass. A drawing competition arranged by the resident welfare association was under way. A few residents were supervising it. One of the men waved at Garv, noticing him sitting alone.

He had no idea who he was but he still waved at him with his left hand. In his right he held his phone where Yahvi's Instagram profile was open. He was checking out her posts. In one picture, she was standing in a balcony, posing with a cigarette between her fingers. He was sure it wasn't DFL Enclave. The caption read: *Just because you hold it doesn't mean you smoke it.* That was a lie. Yahvi smoked. He knew that. And now he knew she lied as well. It was her vice. In another picture, she was wearing a lumberjacket, her hands covering her face. The caption read: *When you wear his lumberjacket, but don't want to look in the mirror.* Garv concluded it belonged

to Ro hit. And with that, images of them naked flashed through his mind. Them fucking. In the dirtiest of positions. His chauvinistic instincts suddenly came to the surface and made him envious of Ro hit. Garv took a deep breath and knew he had to distract his mind. He opened WhatsApp and wrote Anika a message.

A couple of hours later, as he had promised, they were shopping in Season's Mall. Anika seemed excited, like she was out with the love of her life. Not that they had anything between them. Garv was only keeping a promise he'd made to her for what she had done for him. On the face of it, it was transactional. But looking at Anika, he understood she was taking away more from this. He concluded that she was hungry for attention. Not the kind she got because of her curves. The kind you got from someone who meant something to you. And this was where he was confused about her,

because he had never led her on or made her feel like he was interested in her. She worked in his company. She was

helping him out and in return getting what she wanted. Simple.

Garv made himself comfortable on a chair as Anika went inside a trial room to try on a few dresses she had selected. She had asked him a few times what he thought about a particular dress. Garv didn't want to be rude and hence had suggested whatever he could. She had also held his arm a few times. He noticed, but had let it go.

His mind was somewhere else. Nihira had told him that Yahvi died because of a disease. He had never cross-checked it. There was no need to.

However, Yahvi had never mentioned she was suffering from an illness. Nihira knew what the people in the colony had told her. And who had told them? Suresh was the only answer. Suddenly, it all made sense. If Suresh Wadhvani had a family and knew Yahvi was killed, he would never make it public, for it would involve the police. Did Suresh know the truth? He was lost in thought when Anika came out wearing one of the dresses. She posed in front of him as if

asking for his opinion. He gave her a thumbsup without even registering how she looked.

She flashed him a smile and went inside. It was then that a horrific thought struck Garv. What if Suresh had killed Yahvi? The hair on the nape of his neck stood on end. And this 'death from a disease' was a cover up?

After dropping Anika at her place and making some excuse to get out of the lunch plan, Garv went back to DFL Enclave. He parked his car outside the resident welfare association's office and went inside.

He found three to four people who were part of the committee and started making small talk.

After a few minutes, he steered the conversation to Suresh Wadhvani. He told the treasurer, the only one he was a bit familiar with, that Suresh, the

tenant who lived in flat number 627 of Wing C, owed him some money. He did this to get his address. The treasurer obliged and showed him the records. The permanent address mentioned was not the same as the one he had followed

Sukesh to weeks ago. He noted the phone number down.

'But the tenant's name is Sumit Kothari. Not Sukesh Wadhwani,' the treasurer said.

Garv realized that just like the address, Sukesh was registered under a false surname. And chances were that even the phone number was fake. But all these things conveyed that something was fishy.

Stepping out of the office after saving Sukesh's number in his phone, Garv contemplated an important question: Considering Sukesh could be the potential killer, should Garv expose himself and raise suspicion or should he hold back?

19

28 October 2018

I could never tell if she was serious or joking.

I didn't ask her because I knew my question would make her come to a conclusion about me. If I asked 'are you serious?' and she was not then chances were that she would think I was a gullible person. If she meant it, and I still asked then she might respond with 'why are you so surprised?'. She might also interpret that I was taking all this casually. Was I supposed to take it seriously? Was I supposed to say yes instantly without giving it any thought.

'Too long a pause,' she had said when I did not reply. And then never asked me again. Neither verbally nor via text. Our texts had a pattern. I don't know which of us had created it. We limited the dirty talk. When we met, our conversations were philosophical, our statements loaded, and we conversed about microscopic details and complex realizations which might

be invisible to other people in relationships. This was probably one of the reasons why we looked forward to meeting each other. We were connecting at

different levels through different mediums. On text, it was mostly sexual. The sexting was good but our meetings were interesting because of these conversations which were mostly non-sexual.

A few nights ago, she'd said something on text which had stayed with me. I made it a point to ask her when we met next.

'What did you mean when you texted me about handling the pressure of making a success out of a failed relationship?' I asked.

She roared with laughter. I immediately understood she knew I would ask her about it.

Was I that predictable? I felt disappointed with myself.

'You are cute,' she said. I didn't bother to ask why exactly she felt so.

'I knew you would ask,' she said once I started driving. We had met at The Pavilion. I thought we would spend time there like we used to initially.

But she had told me not to park. She had parked her car in the basement of the mall before coming to mine and sitting in the passenger

seat. I had driven on.

'Are you ready with an answer?' I asked.

'I am. I'll tell you after I'm done with my work.

We have less time today.'

I let it go and we moved on to other topics.

We chit-chatted, but she had one eye on Google Maps as she directed me to Zopdeal Bridal Studio in Magarpatta City. She asked me to stay put in the

car since she had friends in the area and didn't want them to spot her with a man she couldn't introduce them to. She didn't say the last bit. I understood nevertheless. We were grown-ups, right? We could understand these unspoken subtexts easily. We better.

She was gone for quite some time. Probably an hour. In the meantime, I made a few work calls and leaned back, listening to my favourite playlist on the car stereo. She apologized when she came back. She had a packet in her hand.

'That's all right.'

'No, it isn't. I swear I didn't know it would take this long. I'm sorry again.'

'I'm in the mood for an explanation, not an apology,' I said as I started the engine. She told me to drive to The Pavilion once again.

'Doesn't matter how we get into a relationship, but the unluckiest ones are those who put themselves under pressure to make it successful when deep down they know it is an utter failure,'

she said after a while.

I understood she was answering the question I had asked earlier. She had my full attention.

'Success and failure are subjective. Whether a relationship is successful or not depends on what you expect from it. Differences are always there, even in the longest, most successful relationships. And anyway, longevity doesn't guarantee quality. Grow old with me, watch sunsets with me, hold me when I cry ... all that is for teenagers,' she took a deep breath and continued, 'Let me not digress. So, where was I?

Yeah, there are always differences. In order to reduce them, we start accepting a lot of things about our partners that we probably wouldn't

under normal circumstances. But since we are married, socially tied up, we use acceptance as a tool to negotiate them. Even then if they don't reduce,

we file for divorce or start seeking what we want from new partners.'

The last bit, I felt, was about us. I didn't interrupt, and after she had finished there was silence.

She took out a cigarette from her bag and lit it. This was the first time I saw her smoke in public. I pushed a button to lower her window.

'Thanks,' she said, taking a long drag from the cigarette. It seemed as if each drag was a long monologue which nobody had heard till then.

'When it hits you, and you know you can't talk it out with your partner or anybody else, you go into denial and invest your time into making it work. Not really for yourself. But for your partner'

his and your parents, your children if you have any, your relatives, basically your social circle. It's an everyday fight after that. And that's what, mister,' she looked at me and added, 'I meant when I texted you that. Did you get your

answer?'

I nodded. We had reached the parking lot of the mall.

'I'm sorry, time's up for today.' There was remorse in her voice. That made me happy because I felt it too.

'Too many apologies in one day,' I said jocularly.

'See how seriously I take you,' she quipped.

'The feeling is mutual.'

'All right,' she said and opened the bag she had brought along from the bridal studio. As always I didn't ask her anything but waited for her to spill the details.

She pulled out a lehnga.

'How do you like it?' she asked.

I touched its fabric. 'It's nice. Would look lovely on you.'

'This is for our wedding,' she said matter-of-factly.

'Are you serious?' I was gobsmacked.

She leaned towards me and gave me a kiss on the cheek. I had to interpret the peck to get my

answer.

20

PRESENT

Curiosity was one thing, but Garv couldn't expose himself to something that was possibly dangerous. He had no idea where this was going. It was a possibility that Yahvi had been killed. It was a case of homicide and the police could get involved at some point. Or maybe whoever did it already had the authorities in their pockets. As a serial entrepreneur, Garv had seen enough to know how things worked in this country. A couple of years ago, one of his childhood friends, Dhiraj, had sent a message on their school WhatsApp group to tell them that their friend Nachiket was no more. Though Garv hadn't been in touch with Nachiket, there was a time in school when they were pretty thick.

He had immediately called Dhiraj to know the details. Nachiket had been killed in an accident.

He and his friends were standing at a bus stop in Dwarka at 2 a.m., casually chit-chatting, when

a BMW ran into them. All four died on the spot.

The driver was the son of a real estate tycoon based in Gurugram. He was driving under the influence. The police came and an FIR was lodged against the boy as there was evidence in the form of CCTV footage, which clearly

showed that Nachiket and his friends were just standing at the bus stop when the BMW rammed

into them. Two days later, the CCTV footage disappeared. The real estate tycoon had bought it for two crore rupees. It was proven that one of his servants was behind the wheel. He was sentenced to life imprisonment. In return, the tycoon had promised to take care of his family.

This incident had deeply affected Garv, and because it had happened with someone he knew, the story had stayed with him for a long time. In a country where protectors of the law are underpaid and greed is more lucrative than morality, money becomes the ultimate god and brings out the worst in people.

After much thought, Garv decided to let the truth be. The fact was he was in love with Yahvi.

And now she was dead. If her husband wasn't interested in the truth, why was he?

That evening, Garv decided to not play their conversations on his woofers like he had done every other night. But it had become a compulsive habit by now. He spoke to Nihira to divert his mind but the burning itch urged him to listen to the conversations again. He connected his phone to the speakers and went to the balcony, lighting a cigarette in the process. He had turned the volume up and opened all the windows so the flat reverberated with their voices.

His instinct told him it was there in her voice the authenticity of her love for him. There was no tinge of fakeness. He had a sudden thought.

What if Yahvi was in love with him alone?

What if she really wanted to disappear with him, like they'd planned, but someone killed her before it happened? How easily he had decided to not pursue the matter just because there was a chance of him being exposed. Exposed in

front of whom? Nihira? He would anyway have dumped her if Yahvi hadn't postponed their plan. Didn't he love her? If, God forbid, Nihira had died mysteriously, wouldn't he have got to the bottom of it? He was no better than Sukesh, who had washed his hands of the matter the minute Yahvi died. Garv took a deep breath, feeling stifled. He could feel the wings of morality flapping hard within, craving to take flight.

He didn't sleep that night. By dawn, he had made up his mind. He was going to find out what really happened to Yahvi and nail whoever was behind her death.

In the wee hours, Garv began by looking for Sukesh Wadhwani on Instagram. First, he tried searching for his name. Several profiles came up, but he soon realized it wasn't easy to locate him with his profile picture. Then it struck him: Yahvi must have followed him or he must have followed her. He was right. Yahvi had followed Sukesh. But he hadn't. Garv quickly checked her posts and found one that Sukesh had liked.

Perhaps he had unfollowed her. Sukesh's profile was private. Garv could neither see his posts nor his followers or the people he was following. He could only read the numbers: 381 posts; 650

followers; 2576 following. Garv's profile had 0

following, 0 followers and 0 posts. And no profile picture either. What were the chances of Sukesh accepting his follow request?

The first thing Garv did, once in office, was summon Anika to his cabin. She came in and settled opposite him. Nobody could tell from her body language that they had been meeting outside work. Garv appreciated it.

'I'm really sorry, Anika, that I ... ' he chose his words carefully and continued, 'kind of used you for my personal issues.'

'May I speak now or wait for you to finish?'

Anika asked.

'Feel free.'

'Look, I did what I did of my own free will. You only requested me, and gave me an opportunity to say no. But I chose to say yes. And I did so

because I got something in return. So I don't get why you are suddenly apologetic about it. As I said earlier, whatever the issue is, I'm neither going to tell anyone nor am I going to ask you about it. Unless you want to talk about it.'

'Let's meet for coffee in the evening?' Garv asked.

'Sure,' she said after a pause.

That evening, Garv left office first. Anika joined him at a cafe in Season's Mall close to their office. The moment she walked in, her demeanour changed. She gave him a hug. Garv returned it.

'All this while, I have been almost extorting all those dinners and outings from you. For the first time, you asked me out for coffee yourself.

Should I think it's my good luck or should I assume I have to do more?' she said teasingly ..

Her remark made him feel guilty and he clarified,

'As I said earlier, you are free to say no.'

'Let me hear it first.'

'The woman Rohit talked about, Yahvi, I was

in love with her,' he said without a pause.

'She wasn't my wife, of course, but we shared something really special.'

There was no reaction from Anika. She was listening intently.

'I have reasons to believe that she was murdered and the case was hushed up. I don't know if I can bring her justice but I want to at least know what happened. For that, I need your help.'

Anika's eyes bore into his. It made him a little uncomfortable. After a few seconds, she said,

'Can I cook for you?'

He was confused initially but understood that this was something she wanted in return. It seemed harmless so he agreed.

'Sure.'

'Thanks. What do I have to do?'

Garv showed her Sukesh's Instagram profile but did not tell her the full story. He only told her that he wanted to meet him in public. Garv had Sukesh's phone number and address, but if

he contacted him, chances were he would refuse to meet him.

'I have an idea,' he told Anika.

That night, once home, Anika sent Sukesh a follow request on Instagram. Within the hour, it was accepted. The first thing she did was share screenshots of his feed and the list of people he was following with Garv.

None of his posts were of any use to him as they were just family photos. But he did notice that he was mostly following models, actresses, gym trainers, etc. It was safe to conclude that Sukesh had a roving eye, Garv thought. After an hour, Anika sent him a screenshot of a message request from Sukesh. It read: *Hi, do we know each other?* This happened after Anika had accepted his follow request and Sukesh had liked almost all her posts.

'I think you know what to do next,' Garv sent her a voice message. She sent back two thumbsup emojis.

It took Anika a week to entice Sukesh, without

being overtly suggestive. They sexted a couple of times and Anika sent him a few faceless photographs, which weren't hers though she claimed otherwise. When she told Garv, he couldn't help but wonder how easy it was to fool people these days.

The fact that Sukesh himself asked for a meeting didn't surprise Garv.

Anika and Sukesh decided to meet on Saturday evening at Public, located in Viman Nagar. She was careful not to share her phone number with him.

Anika reached half an hour late. It was intentional.

Sukesh was already waiting for her in the outdoor sitting area with a mug of beer and a cigarette. He stood up the moment Anika came in.

'You look prettier than your pictures,' he said the moment she shook hands with him. Anika knew this type—they learnt cheesy WhatsApp forwards by heart and used them as pickup lines. It didn't take Garv long to join them as he

was sitting just two tables away. Sukesh was visibly taken aback when Garv came and sat beside Anika unabashedly, looking straight at him.

'We stay in the same colony. Or should I say, I still live there but you moved out,' Garv said.

Sukesh seemed alert, the drunken smile wiped off his face.

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9 November 2018

This was the longest we had gone without talking or meeting. Neither was to be blamed. Diwali was a few days ago. Yahvi's husband's family was visiting, while Nihira and I were in Delhi. Nihira mostly stayed with me at my parents' place in CR Park except for two days when she went to Dwarka to live with her folks.

This time, for undecipherable reasons, I observed my parents closely and noticed a few things that were new to me. My father is a *probashi* Bengali while my mother is Punjabi.

They met during their respective PhDs in Delhi.

In fact, my father was her senior. My mother

always told me how much she hated my father for being overtly serious about everything.

They were part of the same group of friends but were never that friendly. When I asked her what made her choose Dad, she said she knew if she had gone with her parents' choice she would have had to leave her professional aspirations and move to Canada. When she got to know Dad better, she realized he was a man who would always listen to her. She took the first step. Dad said yes. And they have been married for thirty seven years. I thought that was a little selfish of my mother. She married my father because she thought he was someone who would listen to her all his life. My father had a rather funny answer when I asked him the same questions.

'I knew I had to listen to someone all my life.

And I had never seen anyone as beautiful as your mother. So I chose to listen to the second most beautiful woman I'd seen after my mother, and that was your mother.'

It sounded funny but it was also a selfish

choice. Choosing someone for their beauty. And then I started wondering, why did I choose Nihira?

The only answer I could think of was that nobody made me feel as comfortable as she did.

That too was selfish. To be with someone because they made you feel comfortable. It really doesn't matter how much we romanticize the larger-than-life selfless element in the concept of love, the choices we make, one

way or the other, are always selfish. It's more about us than the other person. We only believe the opposite to feel better about ourselves.

I also noticed that my parents took each other for granted, so much so that they were used to it now. The more I observed them, the more convinced I was that they had only existed with each other all these years. Not lived. It scared me. I didn't want the realization that I had not lived life to the fullest to dawn on me at their age. It made me value the importance of the present. And the choices we made in that moment.

This thought made me miss Yahvi even

more. She'd told me not to message her till she messaged me since she was busy taking care of her relatives and her phone may not always be with her.

We finally connected on the phone once I was back in Pune and Nihira had flown back to Bengaluru. We decided to meet for a quick coffee since her relatives were still in town and she had to take them shopping. The last time we met, she had told me she'd bought a lehnga for our wedding. It was a joke which she had clarified immediately. It was for a wedding in her family.

An unusual thing happened that evening. It started raining in November. We sat in the cafe and sipped our coffee, looking at the rain lashing the streets.

'I wish this wasn't a cafe but our home.'

That second-last word-our-made me sigh. It had been two months now, and we had used the days as straws to make a nest for ourselves.

'Don't you ever desire to be a part of a story which you can't live?'

'Like?' I said, finishing my coffee.

'I always wonder what it would feel like to be a young boy's fantasy, an artist's muse, a married man's mistake, a sugar daddy's hedonist, a sportsman's motivation or a politician's secret.'

'Basically, to escape what you already have, I said.

'Exactly. What we already have is also a kind of prison, isn't it? Even if what we have is what we always wanted.'

A thought flashed across my mind and

brought a smile to my face.

'What happened?' she asked.

'I was just thinking. Is it like two characters of a novel meeting characters of a different novel by the same author? Living multiple stories in one life.'

'I like the way you put it. Something like that, yeah. Tell me, can a character complain to the author? Like I have had enough of being in this story, let me hop into another, pretty please?'

I smiled and said, 'I wish. I so wish.'

Yahvi held my hand from across the table. I looked at it and wrapped my fingers around it.

'Let's begin another story?' she said. I was quiet.

'A story where I don't have to go to my house and you don't have to go to yours after this coffee is over. A story where we can go to our home together. Where we don't have to text on the phone in the dead of the night. Where we can talk face to face. Where,' she lowered her voice, 'we don't have to sext. Where we can make love even at 4 a.m.'

Neither of us spoke after that. Maybe I had lived my story with Nihira enough. Maybe she too had lived our story enough but had just not realized it. Maybe we needed to, respectively, appear in another story. Sure, there would be repercussions. Explanations and justification would be needed. I thought of the conversation I had had with my parents. And a question popped up in my head: Was it a sin to be selfish?

There was a deafening clap of thunder. Everyone

was taken aback. But not us. We didn't budge an inch. Or blink an eye.

PRESENT

Sukesh looked at Garv, then at Anika and then back at Garv. It was clear he couldn't connect the dots. His hands, which were on the table, were drawn towards himself. A sign of defensiveness, Garv noted.

'Sorry, I don't think I've seen or met you before,' Sukesh said. He threw another inquiring glance at Anika, hoping she would introduce the person. He understood she knew him.

'I'm sorry but we,' Garv gestured towards Anika and said, 'had to do this. I'm not here to harm you in any way.'

'What is this about?'

'Yahvi. You know anyone by that name?' Garv came straight to the point.

He looked at Garv for a few seconds and then nodded, 'No. I don't know anybody by that name.'

Garv rolled his eyes. He was hoping Sukesh would be a gentleman and at least acknowledge her, if not their affair.

'I'm outside. Smoking,' Anika said and left.

That was part of their deal. She had told Garv that once he met Sukesh, she would leave them alone. She didn't want to be a part of a conversation around a story she didn't even know. Garv had agreed.

After Anika left, Sukesh too stood up and asked the waiter to get the bill. Garv didn't move. After a few seconds, he said, 'I would have tried to know why I was here if I were you.'

Maybe I know things about Yahvi and you.'

Sukesh stared at Garv.

'Things which will remain with me and not go to your real wife if you cooperate here.' His voice was cold and authoritative. It was the same voice he used with his team members when they screwed up.

Sukesh understood that the man had done his homework. He slowly sat back down. And with

that Garv knew he had him. Now he would at least listen and, if pushed enough, might speak as well. The waiter came and put the bill on the table. Sukesh didn't touch it.

'What I already know is that Yahvi and you were having an affair. And that flat you had rented in DFL Enclave was your love nest. Am I right?'

Sukesh looked around and then nodded.

'But you guys pretended to be married and that's what you told everyone in the colony?'

Sukesh nodded again.

'All I want to know is what happened to Yahvi?

She didn't die of an illness like you told everyone in the colony before packing your bags from there.'

'Before I speak, I need to know if you are a cop or Yahvi's husband,' Sukesh said. His hands were back on the table, his fingers clammy with nervousness.

'Neither. You don't have to know anything except I'm harmless if you tell me whatever you

know about her. You can also choose to walk away from here without telling me anything.

But then the screenshots of the messages you exchanged with the woman waiting for me outside would duly reach your wife.' A pause later Garv added, 'Oh, I heard she is the daughter of a high-profile lawyer, is that true?'

Garv wanted to weed out any thoughts

of non-cooperation from Sukesh's mind. He watched as Sukesh grabbed the beer bottle from the table and gulped half of it in one go. Garv waited. After a few seconds, Sukesh kept the bottle down and said, 'It was just a no-stringsattached kind of thing. We met, we fucked and

then we fucked off. That's all.'

Garv took out his phone, opened Yahvi's Instagram profile and showed it to Sukesh.

'Then how did this happen?'

Sukesh peered at it. The photo that Garv was showing him had Yahvi in Sukesh's living room, with the painting behind her. Sukesh had shot it.

'Yahvi and my wife were friends from their

swimming class. I met her at my flat once. We kind of hit it off. Added each other on social media. Exchanged numbers one night and started sexting. Once she came to my place. My wife wasn't there. We got intimate. I'd clicked this picture that day.'

'How long did it last?'

'It was ad hoc. I rented the apartment because doing it at my place was a big risk for both of us.'

'Nobody rents an apartment for an ad hoc affair,' Garv said.

'We were at it for seven to eight months.'

'Then what happened? How did she die?'

Sukesh looked around as if he was going to tell him a secret, and then, leaning forward, said,

'I have no idea. I swear I don't. My wife told me that Yahvi died in an accident.'

'Accident? What kind of accident?'

'I have no idea.'

'Could this be a murder?' It was a trick question as Garv wanted to judge Sukesh's reaction.

But he got more than he had anticipated.

'Could be. She once told me someone at her gym was blackmailing her.'

Gym ... blackmail . . . Garv mentally noted these words.

'I don't know who or why.'

Garv was lost in thought.

'Are you a private detective or something?'

Sukesh asked. Garv looked at him and nodded.

'Thank you, Sukesh. If what you have told me is the truth then we won't meet again.'

'I swear I don't know anything more. Please keep my wife out of this. When you said you were harmless, I believed you. I told you what I knew. But I'm also a family man.'

A family man with a roving eye, who doesn't even think twice before banging his wife's friend, Garv thought, but said, 'Don't worry. My intention is not to hurt anybody. I only have one last question.'

Sukesh asked him to go ahead.

'Do you wear lumberjackets?'

'No, I don't.'

Garv had checked all his Instagram posts. He wasn't wearing a lumberjacket in any of his pictures.

He decided to give him the benefit of the doubt and stood up.

Garv met Anika outside and after dropping her home headed straight to DFL Enclave. He knew he had to meet Rohit but for that he didn't need Anika.

The next morning, Garv reached office early, made a few calls, allocated work and then postponed all the meetings till the afternoon. Something told him that he would need time with Rohit. He left for Anytime Fitness, and once he reached, asked for Rohit at the reception. After a few minutes, Rohit came out. Garv thought he would have to reintroduce himself but Rohit remembered him as Anika's friend.

'I need to talk to you about something,' Garv said.

'Sure. Tell me,' Rohit said, wiping the sweat off his meaty arms.

'Why were you blackmailing Yahvi?' Garv had

realized that the best way to gauge if a person was telling the truth or not was to come straight to the point, without giving them time to plan a reaction or think about their response. As a serial entrepreneur, he had pitched a lot of ideas. And one of the primary rules of these presentations was to size up the audience. He had never thought that boardroom learning would be useful in squeezing out information from a gym trainer one day. Rohit didn't respond immediately.

'Blackmailing Yahvi? Why would I do that?'

His extra casual attitude told Garv that he was lying. People use it as a defence mechanism.

'She told this to someone in power. A police officer,' Garv added the last part. It was a lie but he knew Rohit would fall for it because he didn't want any unnecessary trouble.

'There's a cafeteria inside. Let's chat there?'

Rohit said. Garv knew his lie had worked.

He followed Rohit inside. They stepped into an open area where people were doing cross training.

In one corner, there was a small cafeteria.

There were no customers.

'What did Yahvi tell the police?' Rohit asked.

His voice sounded tense.

'That you were blackmailing her.' Garv maintained his poise.

'How do you know that? Are you a cop?'

'No. I'm a private detective, investigating Yahvi's death,' Garv said. The private detective bit had stayed with him from his conversation with Sukesh.

'Can you give me two minutes? I forgot my phone in the locker room.'

'Sure.'

Garv saw Rohit leave the cafeteria and go inside one of the rooms. He waited. And waited.

And waited. Two minutes turned into twenty.

Suspecting something was wrong, Garv went to the reception once again.

'Could you please call Rohit? He is in the locker room.'

'Rohit left almost ... 'the receptionist glanced

at her watch, 'twenty minutes ago.'

The bastard ran away, Garv thought. He was about to leave but then stopped, turned and asked the receptionist, 'May I have his address, please?'

Rohit lived in Gultekdi. Though Garv knew where it was, he had never been there. Once he reached, he located Rohit's flat inside a rundown building, whose residents all seemed to be senior citizens. The security guard was an old man who looked at Garv blankly as he entered the gate.

There was no elevator, so Garv took the stairs to the third floor, also the top floor of the building.

He found flat number 301 in no time. As he stood in front of the door, he noticed a lock on the latch. Rohit would be here sooner or later, he thought, and decided to wait.

Soon it was lunchtime but Rohit had still not come. Garv called his assistant in office and cancelled all meetings for the day. He went out and spotted a

dabeli-wallah. He ordered two dabelis and sat down on a nearby bench to eat, but kept

an eye on the colony gate. He got a message from Anika when he was walking back to Rohit's flat.

All okay?

Yes. Will call you later, he responded.

Garv sat on the staircase for a good seven hours but Rohit didn't come. It was 9 p.m .. Garv was piqued at wasting an entire day. He looked around. There were three more flats on the floor.

All were locked. The dust and cobwebs on the locks told him that they hadn't been opened for ages. Garv stood up on an impulse and googled

'nearby place to buy a hammer' on his phone.

Google showed him a shop 3 00 metres from the colony.

Garv walked out and returned after ten minutes with a hammer. He reached Rohit's flat and stared at the lock, holding the hammer in his hand. He couldn't make much noise. He had to break it in not more than three blows. He had never broken into someone's house before. But this wasn't just anyone. This was the person who had run away after asking Garv to wait for

two minutes, which meant he was hiding something.

And if it was not about Yahvi, the person Garv had come to love so deeply, he wouldn't have cared much. He broke the lock on the first blow itself. He entered the flat. It looked like a typical bachelor pad. An utter mess. After half an hour of looking around, Garv chanced upon two useful things: Rohit's laptop, which was password protected, and an important piece of information-Rohit did not own a lumberjacket.

12 November 2018

We checked into Hotel Conrad. This time, the room number was 1032. The moment I closed the door, she hugged me tightly. I felt at peace.

As if I was a puzzle who had been looking for its lost piece till I met her. I felt complete while she was around. But once she left, I felt lost all day, all night. I felt like the wind which knew that its destiny was to blow but didn't know in which direction.

And when we met again, I felt the same calmness. Have you ever tried bungee jumping?

My life was the impatient wait just before you are pushed, and Yahvi was my jump.

Hotel Conrad was her idea this time. Not that I hadn't thought of it. But I had been sceptical suggesting it. A hotel room is synonymous with illicit relationships. The moment we hear that two people have booked a hotel room together, our first reaction is to judge them. We believe that nothing beautiful or meaningful can happen between two adults inside a hotel room.

But I beg to differ. Apart from sex, two adults can have other business in a hotel room. The business of emotions: unabashed, unfiltered, uninhibited and deeply personal emotions.

Sometimes, in her presence, I felt like we were each other's personal diaries and every meeting of ours was like a private confession we were penning. Ask anyone, and I am sure they too would love to have a personal human diary.

Yahvi and I just got lucky.

'I've a gift for you,' she said holding on to me.

I didn't know how to react. Thanks to the gender

stereotypes we all grow up with, I always thought that gifts were supposed to be bought by a man for his woman. Not the other way round.

So I felt guilty that except the gerberas, I'd never gifted her anything.

She held my hand and led me to the bed and kept down the bag she was carrying. From it she took out a couple of boxes and gave them to me.

I opened the boxes to find an iPhone and a pair of AirPods.

'I have a good phone already,' I complained. It was too costly a gift for me to accept.

'You have an Android phone and I am an Apple person,' she said. I'd noticed that too. She was an Apple person. While I just bought whatever worked best. I never understood what difference it made. But being an entrepreneur, I did understand the power of subliminal advertising and how it could alter a consumer's perception towards a product and its positioning in society.

'And I want us to have similar things. What do teens call it these days, ah, twinning,' Yahvi said

and took the phone from my hand. I protested, saying I couldn't possibly accept such an expensive gift, but she didn't listen. She removed the SIM card from my old phone and inserted it in the new one, switched it on and handed it to me.

"What will I tell Nihira?" I asked. This was the first time I had mentioned her name in front of Yahvi. Till then we referred to our spouses as

'your wife' and 'your husband'. She didn't say anything immediately. She turned and went to the bed, collapsing down on it and saying, 'Tell her someone who loves you gifted you this.'

Why, doesn't anyone love you?' There was a tinge of naughtiness in her voice.

I looked at her and said, winking, 'I guess someone does.'

She was hungry. We ordered food. We ate and talked between mouthfuls. Our conversations had no structure. We discussed all sorts of things-from

the impending elections to a recent news article on a WhatsApp group where teenage boys had objectified the girls of their

class, to a recent rape case in the city, to pseudo feminism, toxic masculinity, how favouritism was a bigger disease in India than nepotism, to the power of social media and fake news. We kept steering our conversation in different directions, jumping from one topic to another till she asked me something totally different.

'Have you ever felt like this is it? Like from now on life will always remain the same? Like we are stuck in a time warp?'

I understood what she meant, but to be sure, I requested her to elaborate a little.

'You know, when you are sixteen or twenty years old, you know there's time to alter the narrative that life throws at you. But as you cross twenty-five, you suddenly realize no alteration is possible now. You have to stick to the narrative you have built for yourself, based on your own choices or experiences, or whatever destiny has pushed you into.'

I frowned, so she launched into another explanation, complete with a few examples.

'Like, till I was twenty years old, I wanted to do so many things, and mistakes never deterred me! experiments allured me and I thought anything was possible anytime. But now mistakes scare me because I have a lot to lose. I avoid ex -

periments because I know they will change me, change the person I am now. And that might be a problem for a lot of people who are used to how I am. I live for my loved ones. I lose myself every day, bit by bit, so that I can hold on to the person they want me to be. I call it the "this-is-it"

syndrome. Have you ever experienced it?'

I was lost in thought. Different phases of *my* life flashed through my mind. How I wanted to undo some, erase a few, and relive others. She was right,

we didn't have the right to alter our own narrative after a certain point of time.

'I have experienced this. I just could never articulate it the way you did.'

'Perks of being a housewife,' Yahvi said.

'Don't say that. Housewives and single husbands like me have a lot of work at home.'

'I have actually never asked you this. How do you manage alone?'

'Thankfully, I don't belong to that privileged breed of mumma's boys who don't know anything about domesticity,' I said with a tinge of sarcasm.

She came to me, held me tightly and said,

'Don't laugh if I say I sometimes envy your wife.'

I burst out laughing. Then I stopped after hearing what she said next, as she tightened her embrace.

'Will we be able to alter our narratives to fit our story?'

I found myself caressing her head. And saying nothing.

24

PRESENT

Garv was sitting in his office, looking at one of Yahvi's Instagram posts. In the photo, she was

standing on a raised platform by the sea, looking into the camera. And it looked like her dress and hair were blowing in the wind. The location tag confirmed his guess. It was Marine Drive, Mumbai.

She must have gone there with her husband, Garv thought. The caption read: *I wish I was light enough for the wind to carry me away.* Garv

magnified the post, realizing how much he was missing her, when he noticed something odd.

She had earpods in her ears but they weren't AirPods. Garv frowned. It was possible she was wearing her husband's. Or someone else's. But these were certainly not hers. Garv had seen her obsession with Apple products. He checked the date of the post: 12-10-2018. He picked up the receiver of the landline from his desk and dialled 109. A few seconds later, a guy named Dilip picked up.

'Good morning, sir,' Dilip said.

'Good morning, Dilip. Any luck with the laptop?'

'I am at it. I'll need one more day, sir.'

'Sure. I'll wait,' Garv said and hung up. His thoughts went back to Rohit and the previous evening when he had entered his house forcibly.

He knew it was unlawful to break into someone's home, but he was sure Rohit wouldn't involve the police because he had much more to lose than Garv.

After coming back from Rohit's place, he had tried to guess his laptop's password but had given up after an hour of trying. He had even googled how to crack a laptop's password. By midnight, he had decided to involve an IT expert.

The next morning, the first thing he had done on reaching office was to call his IT cell head, Dilip Mohan, into his cabin.

'Yes, sir.' Dilip was always servile.

'Dilip, this is my friend's laptop,' Garv had said, giving it to him, 'he forgot his password and isn't able to unlock it. Would you be able to help?'

'May I?' Dilip had asked, extending his hand.

'Go ahead,' Garv had said and watched as Dilip opened the screen and pressed a few buttons.

'I think I'll need some time, but I will be able to crack it.'

'No information should be lost. In fact, can you retrieve things which have been deleted?'

Dilip, for a second, had looked up at him. Garv knew he must have understood that there was something more to the story than a friend's laptop gone kaput.

'I'll try.'

'I'll make sure you get a 10 per cent increment this year,' Garv had said. His entrepreneurial instinct knew when to bait someone and with what for the best results.

'Thanks, sir. I will get back to you very soon,'

Dilip had said and exited the room with a smile on his face.

Garv's phone beeped, bringing him back to the present. It was a message from Anika: *When you do want to test my ... culinary skills as promised?*

Garv couldn't help but smile. He knew the ellipsis was deliberate.

Whenever, he responded.

Cool, tonight. My place?

Garv realized that if a third person read the message, they would surely misinterpret it as something else.

Okay, he messaged back.

I'll leave early. Drop in by 9.30 p.m.?

8.30 p.m. works? Garv didn't want it to be a late night.

Sure,

Later that evening, when Garv reached Anika's place, he thought it would be just a casual dinner; the only difference being that Anika was cooking the food herself. But the moment he stepped into her house, he realized something was different. It seemed like a much more formal affair. A glance at Anika confirmed his doubts. She was wearing a saree. He hadn't seen her in one before. Her hair was nicely done up.

She looked like perfect marriage material.

'You look different.'

'Okay. I don't know if that's a compliment,' she said, closing the door behind him.

'It is. You look very elegant. You should wear sarees more often.'

'I will, if you keep coming home for dinner,'

she said.

The thought of getting some flowers, wine or dessert had crossed Garv's mind when he was on his way here. But he had let it be. Even a simple gesture could be misconstrued by Anika.

He knew she was interested in him. He knew he was using her and these constant meetings were a result of that, but he didn't want it to be anything more.

Garv could smell the Indian spices already. It filled his nostrils and worked up his appetite.

'Brace yourself for a seven-course Indian meal, sir,' Anika said.

'Oh, come on, you didn't have to work that hard,' Garv said, feeling bad.

'Let me decide that, please. I work hard for things that matter to me,' Anika said. Something about the way she said it told him it wasn't just a simple

dinner for her. The vibe was

different. Garv couldn't apprehend it. They had nothing going on between them. Why would she make it so personal?

Anika didn't let Garv enter the kitchen or help her. She made him sit at the dining table as she got busy bringing out the dishes. It was a feast, with one single man attending it. Garv was surprised to see most of his favourite food.

'How did you know all these are my favourites? Don't tell me it's a coincidence.'

Anika smiled slyly and said, 'At the risk of being labelled a stalker, let me confess that at the office party that we had a few months ago ... '

'At Ritz-Carlton?' Garv asked.

'Yes. I noticed you went to the Indian side of the buffet more, and also noted the dishes of which you took a second helping.'

Garv stared at her for some time and then responded with a simple 'okay' because he didn't know what else to say.

'Told you at the cost of being labelled a stalker,'

Anika said with a smile.

'Why aren't you eating?' Garv changed the topic.

'I'll eat after you are done.'

Anika exuded affection and warmth. But he still couldn't understand the reason for it.

For dessert she served rasmalai, and it was one of the best kinds he had ever had.

'I think you should take your culinary skills seriously and do something about it. This ras malai is out of this world,' he said.

'Thank god. That was the only thing that I made for the first time today.'

'You are kidding,' Garv said as he gobbled up the dessert.

Anika smiled and, brushing off the compliment with a wave of her hand, said, 'I know I shouldn't be asking this, but ... may I?'

'Umm-hmm,' Garv mumbled, licking his spoon.

'Did you go to Yahvi's house?'

Garv looked up.

'The address we got from the gym. Did you go there? I'm just curious. You can choose not to answer,' Anika said quickly, sensing it could dampen the mood.

How the fuck did I miss that? Garv wondered.

He had gone there but had returned, fearing the truth about Yahvi. What if it contradicted the image he had of her and the plans they had made together? After that, the fact that he'd Yahvi's address had escaped his mind altogether.

'What happened?' Anika asked. Garv nodded and continued having the rasmalai. 'I will, soon,'

he said.

Before Garv left, Anika made another request.

'Can I hug you once?'

'Yeah, sure,' he said, feeling a bit awkward.

Anika hugged him. It didn't feel like a possessive hug, but like she wanted comfort and reassurance.

He only put his hand around her. Barely touching her.

'Thanks,' she said, pulling away.

He drove in the direction of his house after saying his goodbyes. But midway, he changed

his plan. He turned his car around to go to Yahvi's place. It was in a posh-looking high rise with twin towers. Garv slowed his car as he neared the main gate. He kept looking at the buildings and wondering why Yahvi had never told him about her house? Why had she always driven to Park Road after their meetings? Why had she lied about living there? There was a possibility that she had two houses. But nobody lives in two houses simultaneously. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel as he weighed his options. If he decided to go inside and meet her real husband, how would he introduce himself?

He could manipulate Rohit, but he couldn't lie to Yahvi's real husband. On a hunch, he opened Yahvi's Instagram profile on his phone.

In one photo, she was standing in front of a garden.

He craned forward to look more clearly. He could see one portion of that garden. The only difference was that the picture had been taken during the day. The location tag on the post was 'HOME'. Garv sighed. Finally, he had found

something on Yahvi's Instagram which seemed believable. After about fifteen minutes, he made a U-turn to go home.

Garv was woken up the next morning, not by his alarm clock but by a phone call from Dilip.

He sat up on his bed and glanced at the clock: 7.19 a.m.

'I'm really sorry to disturb you, sir, but I've gained access. I thought it was urgent, so called you right away.'

Stifling a yawn, Garv said, 'That's all right.'

'Were you able to retrieve any deleted files?'

'Mostly, yes. There's a lot of porn and videos of women gymming.'

'Okay. Get the laptop to office. I will see you there,' Garv said and jumped out of bed.

'Sure, sir. I don't know if it helps, but in one of the porn videos your friend is also there.'

Garv stopped. His gut told him that perhaps this was what he was looking for when he picked up the laptop.

'How did you know what he looks like?' Garv asked.

'I saw his thumbnail photograph on the home screen.'

'Listen, Dilip, reach office with the laptop in an hour,' he said, ending the call in haste.

As Garv hurried through his morning routine to reach office as quickly as possible, Anika entered her gym, listening to a Punjabi track on her headphones. She stopped when she saw Rohit. He was arguing with the accounts guy over some payment issue. Anika stopped the

.

music.

'Hey, Rohit, where did you disappear?' Anika asked. She didn't know that Garv had met him or broken into his flat.

'I'm leaving,' Rohit said curtly.

'Why?'

'Ask your friend,' Rohit said. He sounded bitter.

'Which friend?'

'The one who came here asking about Yahvi. I

have nothing to do with her. And still he broke into my flat. I know it was him. I'm a simple guy from a village who is just trying to earn a decent living. But not any more, thanks to your friend.'

Anika. couldn't make head or tail of what he was saying.

'But let him know that I saw Yahvi with a young man at the mall. And I'm sure he is the one responsible for her death, not me,' Rohit said and, snatching the cheque out of the accounts guy's hand, dashed out of the gym.

'Tyala ved lagla aahe [I think he has gone crazy],' the accounts guy said in Marathi.

Anika simply shrugged and went inside the gym.

In office, when he clicked on the video Dilip was referring to, Garv knew it was a bad idea.

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into view, we had to back off. Otherwise there would be chaos.

I sat in the balcony the whole night, smoking one cigarette after another till the packet was empty. I wondered how we humans could cohabit

with only one person at a point in time.

There was no place for a third person. Thus, I couldn't live with both Nihira *and* Yahvi. I had to choose between them. It was frustrating because I was

sure I loved both. And then my mind rode another train of thought. What if Nihira also had someone in her life whom she loved as much as she loved me? What if she too felt lonely, felt the need to share her feelings with someone else? What if it was raining in Bengaluru right now and she was sitting by her window, wondering whether she should choose her lover or me? There was no end to these thoughts. Finally, I took a deep breath after stubbing my last cigarette in the ashtray and went inside. By the time I hit the bed, I decided that if tomorrow Nihira came to me and told me she had a lover and wanted to be with him, I wouldn't get mad at her. Whether Yahvi and I remained together or not was a different story. I would surely feel bad if Nihira left me for another man, but after having experienced

whatever I had with Yahvi, I would understand her decision. How do you stop someone who has decided to belong to someone else?

In the morning, I asked Yahvi if we could meet. She said she wanted to meet me too unless rain played spoilsport. But by the time I finished work, the rain had stopped, though it was still mucky outside. I was just packing up when Yahvi called, saying she was waiting below my office. I rushed out like an excited teenager. She asked me to hop into her car. I didn't think twice.

She drove us to the Pune University campus.

Draped in the afterglow of rain, the damp campus roads and the flora surrounding them made it look like a scene out of a fairy tale.

A few minutes after we entered the campus, it started to drizzle again. Yahvi parked by the side of the road. There was nobody around. She surprised me again by taking out a flask.

'What's on your mind?'

'Just wanted to have evening tea with you,' she said and took out two paper cups. I helped her

pour out the hot, steaming tea. She lowered the windows and we reclined our seats. Then she sat facing me, her legs crossed, and asked, 'How is It?.'

I sipped the tea and let its warmth wash over me. She had spiced it up with ginger and cardamom.

'Jhakaaaas!' I quipped. She burst out laughing.

'What? There are other sides to my personality too,' I said, becoming a little conscious.

'I would love to see them all,' she said.

'For that you can't be at your Park Road house at night,' I said. To be honest, I had said it in the heat of the moment. I didn't mean anything by it. But I saw her stiffen and sit up. There was a haunting silence between us which troubled me.

'Did I say anything wrong?' I asked. I was ready to apologize even though what I said was unintentional.

She nodded and said, 'What you said was right. It was so true that I wasn't able to take it.'

After a few more silent moments, she asked,

'Do you think if we simply continue things as they are, one day we will get bored of each other and perhaps break up?'

'Who knows what will happen in the future?'

The future anyway is an echo of our present decisions,'

I said. I was looking ahead, at the road.

From the corner of my eye, I could sense that she was looking at me. Without turning towards her I asked, 'What are you looking at?'

'Remember, once during our initial meetings, I'd told you that I've this habit of imagining babies with strangers?'

'With ugly people. Yeah. Why? Do I suddenly qualify?' There was a hint of amusement in my voice.

She giggled and said, 'You aren't ugly, you aren't a stranger any more, so I don't want to imagine a baby with you.' She sipped her tea and said, 'I want it for real.'

I let what she had said sink in. Into my head.

Into my heart. She had put my thoughts from last night into words. There was no running away from it now. She had laid it all out in the

open. Everything about this relationship-its present and future-was dependent on what I said at this point in time. What I decided right now. And I couldn't say, 'Let me think'. If I still had to think then what was I doing asking her questions like: 'Why you don't spend nights with me?' Were they just fleeting thoughts or were they solid laments? My answer would decide that.

'Are you saying we should have a baby, and you will tell your husband it's his?' If my decision was going to decide our future, I had to be sure what exactly she had in mind.

'No. What I'm suggesting is that we should simply disappear from our present reality. And make a different reality somewhere else,' she said.

Suddenly, it started raining heavily, as if nature had understood my inner quandary, and the windshield slowly fogged up.

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PRESENT

It seemed like the video had been shot inside the locker room of a gym. The camera was probably hidden as a portion of the screen seemed to be covered by a cloth. Rohit had appeared in the beginning of the video and could be seen placing the camera at a distance. Then he had gone out of the

frame. Nothing happened for the first two minutes. Then Rohit came into the frame with a woman. It was clear he had pulled the woman towards him, though Garv couldn't make out if he was forcing himself on her as she wasn't resisting. They kissed with the woman's back to the camera. Then Rohit pulled up her T-shirt, pushed aside her bra and sucked her breasts alternately.

It was here that Garv paused it. There was no point watching the entire ten-minute video. He understood they had sex. He felt his body temperature rising. The face of the woman wasn't clear but when he compared Yahvi's gym video from her Instagram feed to this video, he understood it was her. He found more videos

of different women gymming. It was clear they were not aware they were being secretly filmed.

Garv understood Rohit was a degenerate who gave vent to his perversion by watching women working out in tight, figure-hugging sportswear, but what he didn't understand was why someone like Yahvi would give in.

Garv searched the contents of the laptop for the next three hours but didn't find anything useful. He was sure Rohit had used this video to blackmail Yahvi. And the fact that he had to resort to blackmail told Garv that she must have said no after the first time. Why would you blackmail someone if she was already willing to do what you wanted? Unless Rohit wanted money as well. Garv kept thinking. His thoughts were interrupted by a knock at his cabin door.

He looked up. Anika peeped in.

'Hey, I need a few minutes of your time,' she said. Garv gestured her to come inside. She did.

There was a nervous energy about her.

'I met Rohit in the gym today. He said he was

leaving the city. But he said you broke into his house? What a pathetic lying son of a bitch he is,' Anika said in one breath.

Garv stood up. He went and stood by the glass window behind his desk, watching the bustling road below. He knew why Rohit was leaving the city. He was guilty of blackmailing Yahvi. But Garv couldn't report him because he didn't want to get involved with the police himself. He didn't want them to know who he was and how he knew Yahvi. Then a thought struck him. Maybe he could come out in the open if he could prove that Rohit was responsible for Yahvi's death.

'Rohit said something else as well. I think you should know this,' Anika said.

Garv turned to look at her.

'He said that the person he saw Yahvi with in the mall was a young man.'

Garv frowned. 'A young man?' he muttered under his breath. As he went back to his chair, he thought that the man could be anybody. What was important to know was what exactly Rohit

saw that affected him so much that he even mentioned it when he was drunk. It had to be something out of the ordinary because it had remained with him and also made him believe that Yahvi had 'betrayed' him. From what Garv knew of Rohit now, the last part could be a lie as well.

Garv glanced at Anika. Her eyes were on him.

'I went to Yahvi's place,' he said. He was glad there was someone with whom he could discuss all this without caring about being judged or asked continuous questions or listening to lectures on morality.

'Did you meet her husband?' Anika asked.

The curiosity in her voice told Garv that even though she didn't ask a lot of questions, she was intrigued by what she knew till now.

'No, I didn't. I don't think I'll be able to. What will I say to him?'

'Do you want me to do this like we did the Sukesh thing?' If the question was a face, it didn't have any make-up.

Garv had thought about it last night. Anika seemed to be the only way to get to the real husband and probably to the truth. But asking her to help was making him uncomfortable. He was her boss, and asking her for favours outside of work was eating away at him, but he knew he had no other option.

'What do you want in return this time?' Garv asked. He didn't want to come across as someone who was okay with whatever she demanded in exchange for help.

'We can talk about it later,' she said.

He felt there was more to this statement.

'Look, Anika, I know you have been of great help to me. But I just want to be clear that ... '

'Don't worry. I won't ask you to have sex with me,' she said.

'I'm really sorry if you felt offended.'

'I didn't. I just told you a fact.'

Garv wanted to continue the conversation, but he saw someone waiting outside his cabin.

Anika turned, following his gaze, and realized it as well.

'Let's meet after office?'

'Done,' Anika said and took her leave.

Later that evening, they met at a cafe where Garv briefed her on all aspects of the plan: the kind of information he wanted from Yahvi's husband and

how she should broach the subject.

Anika listened attentively and made her notes.

She decided to visit Yahvi's husband the next evening.

Anika had jotted down all the questions on her phone so she didn't miss anything. When she entered the premises, the security guard stopped her. Anika gave him Yahvi's full name.

The guard told her the flat number. She walked straight into the building and stopped in front of the flat. Her husband's name was written on the nameplate: Swagat Goel. A man around Anika's height opened the door.

Anika was there for close to an hour. After that, she met Garv at the nearest cafe, as planned. He was waiting for her when she walked in.

'Damn, I felt like a journalist doing a sting operation,' Anika said, letting go of a deep sigh.

Garv hid his impatience behind a tight smile.

He had ordered coffee for her. As it arrived, Garv said, 'Have it, take a deep breath and tell me in detail what happened. Every bit of it.'

Anika did as she was asked. Then got ready to give him a blow-by-blow account.

'All right,' she began. 'Swagat, Yahvi's husband, opened the door. Obviously, he didn't recognize me. So I introduced myself as Yahvi's friend from the gym, as we had planned. I told him I had come to inquire if she was all right since she had not come to the gym in a while.

He asked me to come in. I did. He lives with his parents. I greeted them. He told them I was Yahvi's friend. Then he told me that Yahvi met with an accident one night while crossing the road and succumbed to her injuries. Apparently, she got hit by a car. But he could trace neither the car nor the driver. I pretended to be shocked.

After that, I engaged him in conversation, asking

one question after another. So, they don't have a house on Park Road. When I mentioned that I missed her Instagram stories and that's how I first got concerned, Swagat was surprised to know that Yahvi was on social media. According to him, she found social media useless. His mother offered me tea, but I politely refused. I took my leave after that.'

'Wasn't he suspicious? Didn't he check her Instagram profile?'

'Oh yes, he did. I especially wanted to ask him about the lumberjacket. But I couldn't steer the conversation that way. He looked like a smart person. Unlike Sukesh. I didn't want to take a chance.'

'Hmm, got it.'

'But he noticed another post and said that Yahvi and he had never been to an amusement park together, and he didn't remember her telling him about it.'

Garv understood that Anika was talking about the photo in which Yahvi was standing on a

pirate ship, one of the attractions at the amusement park. The location tag of the photo said Imagica.

'Anything else you saw, heard or felt that was odd?' Garv asked.

Anika thought for some time, sipping her coffee.

'I think that's about it.'

'When he told you about the accident, did he sound convincing?'

'He did.'

'Hmm.'

There was silence for some time.

'What now?' Anika asked.

'The mystery of the lumberjacket remains. It could be his or not.'

'Also, the amusement park,' Anika added.

'Yeah. If she'd gone there with friends, Swagat would have known.'

'I concur.'

A few seconds later, Anika suddenly blurted out, 'Oh shit, I remember something. Swagat

looked at one of the posts a little too meticulously.

As if he was taken aback by it.'

'Which one?' Garv asked, showing her Yahvi's Instagram profile on his phone.

'This,' Anika pointed out.

She was pointing at the picture which had been taken at Marine Drive in Mumbai. *Swagat didn't click it? Wasn't he aware that she had been to Mumbai?* he wondered.

'What next?' Anika asked.

'I have to get to that young man Rohit was talking about. Perhaps he will answer a few of my questions.'

'How?'

'I will figure it out. Could you please show me Swagat's picture on Facebook? I don't know what he looks like.'

Anika opened the Facebook app on her phone, searched for Swagat Goel and, after scrolling for a few seconds, opened one of the profiles. She

tapped on the profile picture. Once it filled her screen, she gave the phone to Garv.

'That's him,' she said.

Garv frowned. The picture wasn't clear to him. He made a mental note of visiting the eye doctor again once Nihira was back. She always pushed him, but it was he who neither wore his specs regularly nor saw the doctor. Garv looked closely. He could tell this wasn't the guy Yahvi had referred to as her husband when they had chanced upon him in the food court. And he had a pretty solid reason for thinking so.

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19 November 2018

I thought a lot about what happened the last time Yahvi and I met. Part of it was magical.

And part of it had shown us our reflection in the reality mirror and scared us both. I say 'both'

because we did talk about it on the phone and in texts.

The decision itself, of leaving everything and disappearing, didn't scare us. Maybe because we had convinced ourselves that we deserved this.

And when we convince ourselves of something, the decision-making is only an eventuality. So that way the first part was done. The fact that our partners would be left high and dry unsettled us the most. Divorce was not an option.

Yahvi was clear that even if she demanded one, her husband wouldn't agree. Not because he loved her. *Maybe he did love her.* But because she loved another man and wanted to live with him.

She said she knew her husband well. He would take it as an insult and see me as a competitor.

He would then wage war rather than try to understand that his wife wasn't interested in him any more. And then there were her parents, his parents, her relatives, his relatives ... She was sure name-calling and mud-slinging would ensue as nobody in her or her husband's family had ever been divorced. It was considered a taboo.

I didn't think my parents would have an issue.

My only problem was Nihira and what I would tell her. I couldn't even tell her I didn't love her, because I did. I couldn't say something stupid like 'I love you but I don't want to live with you any more'. Even if I did say it, it would weigh heavily on my conscience. Hence, disappearing was in a way the best option but not the most courageous. Or so we thought. No explanation, no justification and, most importantly, no confrontation.

It sounded doable when we talked

about it, but something about it made me uncomfortable.

Weren't Yahvi and I demeaning our

own love if we chose to disappear just like that?

Wouldn't our partners remember us as traitors If we simply walked out on them? I didn't know about Yahvi, but I couldn't do this to Nihira. It was like telling her that whatever we had shared in all these years of knowing each other, staying with each other, standing by each other, was all a pretence. There was no truth in it. And I was pretty sure Nihira wouldn't be able to take it.

Honestly, neither would I.

Yahvi and I had taken some time away from each other. We had decided that the next time we met we would have our answers ready. If we didn't then we wouldn't talk about it again. The next time was today.

We decided to meet at the Pune University campus again. There was a serene vibe to the place. The kind you need when you are going to make an

important decision. It felt like we were on a ship in the middle of the ocean and now was the time to take a call on the direction we wanted to go in, for that would decide our shores. We parked our cars and started strolling.

She held my arm with both her hands as we slowly walked along the lonely road, till we reached a tree under which a few cycles were kept. All of them were locked. Then Yahvi left me¹ and I saw her doing something on her phone. I inquired but she gestured with her hand to be quiet. After a few minutes, she went up to one of the cycles, scanned a code on the

vehicle and unlocked it. She repeated it with another cycle.

'Let's do this,' she said as she mounted it. I understood that the cycles were managed by some

app. I took the other unlocked one. I was cycling after ages. It was rejuvenating. We rode next to each other.

'So, do you have an answer?' she asked. We were cycling up a slope.

'Frankly, I don't think I can disappear without having a talk with Nihira.'

'Then talk to her first and leave,' she said.

'I mean ... '

'I know what you mean. I respect that.

Nobody should break up like that. To be honest, even I thought about it a lot. I can't just walk out on my husband one fine day. It's one of those thoughts that can make you feel good but are not practical.'

'Exactly my feeling. So, do we not ... '

'I have an idea,' she said as we cycled down a slope.

'What is it?' I asked once we were back on level ground.

'The plan doesn't have an expiry date,' she said.

'Correct.'

'I think it's okay to let it be till we are sure of doing it.'

'Absolutely. But what are you arriving at?'

'Why don't we prepare our partners in such a way that they don't feel our absence once we leave? Emotionally, physically. No casualties on either side,' she said, and after a moment realized I'd stopped cycling. She stopped too. But I caught up with her the next moment.

'What happened?' she asked.

'I think it's a brilliant way to go about it.' *At least it would take care of the simmering guilt with which we would have to live if we left them,* I thought.

'Then let's start planning?'

As I stood there, I suddenly felt positive about this decision of ours. We weren't disappearing

just like that, after all. We would prepare our respective partners in a way that they wouldn't break down after we disappeared. If we were choosing what we wanted, we were also preparing them so they didn't feel lost. That's what you call a responsible break-up, if such a thing existed. I think I loved Yahvi more that day onwards.

28

PRESENT

Garv felt like he was in a suspense novel which could go in any direction as he flipped the pages, but he wasn't sure if the ending would make him happy. Swagat had a crew cut while the man he had seen in the food court had long, flowy hair. Garv checked all of Swagat's pictures on Facebook (he had a public profile), especially the ones around the time when he'd seen the man with long hair, but he couldn't find anything.

And he couldn't ask Anika to go to Swagat's house to ask him if he ever had long hair.

That would be simply stupid.

A peculiar thing that Garv noticed while scrolling through his profile was that there were no photos of Yahvi. Why wouldn't a guy put up photos with his wife? Garv had chauvinistic friends who never let their wives be on social media. Was Swagat one of them? That was probably why he wasn't aware of Yahvi's Instagram account.

Garv kept scrolling and finally came across a picture which was put up around the time he had spotted the man with the long hair. Even then Swagat had short hair.

As Garv waited for Nihira to exit the airport that night, the only conclusion he could reach was that Yahvi had lied to him about that man being her husband. *But why would she lie to him?*

He clearly remembered that the incident had happened during their third meeting. There was no reason for her to even tell him that

the person was her husband. And yet she had.

Now he could safely say it was a lie. *Would this investigation of the matter ever lead me to the truth?* he wondered. Why had she never told him about Sukesh or even Rohit? Or ... about the one who owned the lumberjacket? That was another matter that had been niggling at his mind. There was clearly another person involved. Could it be the young man Rohit had mentioned?

'Hey, handsome! Waiting for someone?' It was Nihira. He hadn't realized when she had sneaked up on him.

'What did you do to your hair?' he asked.

Nihira mostly wore her luscious hair in a loose bun, but today it framed her face beautifully.

'Haircut, what else?' Nihira said, holding his right arm with both her hands. 'I knew you wouldn't get it immediately,' she said.

Garv smiled guiltily and said, 'Get it? I didn't even recognize you.' He took charge of her luggage.

Nihira was full of stories about her NGO. Garv had always admired her passion. She was always in control. He had never seen get into those grey moods or complain about anything. She was a decision-maker and not a cribber. That was the best thing about his wife. She continued talking animatedly but Garv was not listening; he was busy admiring her in his mind. Her nails weren't as nicely done as Yahvi's. He never saw her with any make-up on. But he still found her attractive. He was in love with who she was as a person. Right then, he understood the difference between his love for Nihira and Yahvi. He was in love with who Nihira was. And he loved how Yahvi made him feel about himself.

Nihira's voice broke his reverie. She was telling him that she was in the mood for kathi rolls. He took out his phone and ordered some right away.

When they reached their apartment building, the delivery person was already waiting for them. After dinner, Nihira complained of a slight headache. She asked Garv to get her balm

from her bag. He brought it to her. Nihira massaged it into her forehead and got into bed. Soon she was fast asleep. But Garv was wide awake.

He knew sleep was miles away. Something was bothering him. He had found a visiting card in her bag when he had been fumbling around for the balm. The name on it was Dr Sharan Pandita, a clinical psychologist. There was the address of his clinic in Bengaluru. There was another address in smaller font right below, of his clinic in Pune. He had always known that Nihira got a lot of male attention, but this was the first time he felt insecure. Was it because he knew that if he could have an affair, so could Nihira? These thoughts had plagued him earlier too, but then he had Yahvi in his life. For the first time in eight years, Garv found himself going through his wife's things without telling her. Other than the visiting card, he also found

a voice modulation certificate from an institute in Bengaluru issued months back. *What would she need that for?* Garv wondered.

He slept late that night. Nihira was already up by the time he woke up the next morning.

When he went out to the living room, he saw her standing next to the dining table, looking at the contents of her handbag strewn all over.

'You know I never find anything inside your bag. I had to do this. How else would I've found the balm for you?' Garv tried to explain. He sat down at the table for breakfast. Nihira had made him an omelette and squeezed out some fresh orange juice. He had juice in the morning only when Nihira was home, otherwise it was black coffee.

Truth be told, Garv had deliberately emptied her bag on to the table in the middle of the night. He wanted to see Nihira's reaction and if she told him about the doctor herself. It would be natural for people to be extra defensive or aggressive if someone probed the nest where their lie was hidden. If there was something going on, he wanted her to come clean. He pretended to be busy on his iPad, taking mouthfuls of juice in

between, but he had his eyes on Nihira. He soon heard her say, 'Damn, I forgot. I have to call him.'

She sounded normal.

She was holding the card in her hand.

'Who?' he asked.

'We need a new psychologist for our NGO. I got a reference from someone. I need to call him today.'

Garv felt relief wash over him. He was happy that none of the thoughts that had ruined his sleep last night were true.

'Sort that out later, please. Have breakfast now,' he said. Nihira sat down.

'I saw a voice modulation certificate in your bag last night. What's that about?' Garv asked, his eyes focused on the iPad. He wanted to sound casual.

'Ah, that! Wait, let me show you something,'

Nihira said, pulling a chair and sitting in front of Garv. He looked at her with curiosity.

'Close your eyes,' she said.

'What?'

'Come on!'

'Okay!' Garv closed his eyes.

'How are you, Mr Roy Gill?'

Garv opened his eyes quickly. He thought he had heard a totally different person. He looked visibly taken aback, while Nihira was almost choking with laughter.

'Are you going to tell me how the fuck you did that?' Garv asked.

'Just look at your face,' Nihira said between laughs.

'Stop it and tell me, Nihira.'

'Okay, so our NGO's research and development team told us that our voice is the only thing that helps victims feel comfortable, and we should know when to become authoritative, friendly, warm, sympathetic, etc. They should feel like they are talking to a friend. So they made us go through this voice modulation training. Got it, scaredy-cat?'

'Shit, you're pretty good.'

'Want another demonstration?'

Garv nodded. He closed his eyes.

'How are you, Garv?' Nihira said. Garv thought he had heard Yahvi. His eyes flew open.

'What happened?' Nihira asked.

'Nothing, let's finish breakfast,' Garv changed the topic.

Garv kept his bag in his cabin and went out for a smoke. Anika joined him. She lit a cigarette and then turned to look at him.

'I was wondering if we could stay together for a day,' she said, with such forwardness that Garv felt uncomfortable.

'What do you mean?' he asked. His tone told Anika he didn't like what she had said.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean it that way. Okay, let me rephrase it. Could we spend the whole day together? From morning till night?' Though she

had reworded her request, she had meant what she'd said earlier.

'My wife is here for a couple of days. Perhaps after that?' Garv said.

'That's all right. No rush,' she said, exhaling a cloud of smoke. Before taking another drag, she said, 'I must say I've started to feel like a detective's assistant these days.'

Garv smirked and said, 'I'm terribly sorry for that.'

'Don't be. I said it in a good way. There's something to look forward to apart from work.'

He knew it wasn't the snooping around she looked forward to. His company was her motivation.

'What's next? Are we meeting her husband again?' Anika asked.

'That won't help. I have a feeling that if we can somehow reach the man Rohit was talking about, we may get a few answers.'

'And for that we need to get to Rohit?'

Garv nodded.

'It will be difficult to find him without involving the police. I don't think anybody knows where he has gone.'

'That's why I haven't been able to do anything since you met Swagat.'

'But I think there's another way to ... '

Their conversation was interrupted by their company's CFO, Pravin, who had also stepped out for a smoke. He glanced at Garv and then at Anika. A sly grin spread over his face. It was evident he was judging them for standing close to each other and sharing a cigarette. Anika sensed it as well. She stubbed her cigarette midway and went inside. Pravin immediately came to Garv.

There was an excitement in his body language.

'Don't tell me you have done her?' Pravin asked. He was a guy whose every joke had a sexual connotation, whose every statement was sexist and every thought chauvinistic. Garv tolerated him because he was good at his work, and somewhere he believed that it didn't really matter what kind of people his employees were

unless they did something unethical or criminal within the company.

'Shut up. She isn't that kind of a woman,' Garv snapped.

'Damn,' Pravin genuinely sounded disappointed.

'I thought I too had a chance if she

spread those luscious legs for you.'

Garv stubbed his cigarette and excused himself, making it clear to Pravin that he didn't like what he had said.

Once in his cabin, he messaged Anika: *Let's not talk in office from now on, please.*

A moment later, she messaged back: *Why? Did Pravin say anything?* Anika was smart. She had an inkling.

He replied: *The obvious, if you know what I mean.*

I'm sorry, she replied.

For? It's not your fault.

For compromising your image.

It's not about me. Thanks to our society, nobody ever questions the man. It's always whether the

woman opened her legs or not. And if she did, then others think they too have a chance. In their heads, if she did it with one man, she is a whore forever.

It's sick, but it's the truth. Sorry to put it so bluntly.

Anika was reading his message when another one popped up:

I wouldn't have said anything if it was about my image. But it's about yours, which I can't allow.

Anika smiled when she read that. She wrote: *Yahvi and your wife are both lucky women.* Then she erased it and wrote a new one: *Thanks. Let's meet in the evening at the same cafe where we last met?*

Done. But not today. On Monday. I need to be with my wife.

r---...J

On Monday, Anika left office early and went straight to the cafe for her meeting with Garv.

She was already sitting at a table when Garv walked in five minutes later. After last week's incident, Anika had made it a point to not go to the smoking zone in office when Garv was there. He

had noticed and appreciated it but hadn't said anything to her.

In the cafe, they ordered coffee and settled down. 'So, you were saying something when Pravin came in the other day,' Garv said. He had wanted to discuss it on the weekend over text but Nihira was around and he wanted to give her his full attention till she left for Bengaluru.

Hence, he didn't message Anika.

'Yeah, so I was saying that reaching Rohit would be tough. I asked people in the gym yesterday but even they don't know of his whereabouts.

I tried his number but it's switched off.

What I was wondering was, we have blindly trusted Sukesh. What if he too is lying like Rohit?'

She doesn't even know her husband was sleeping with her friend. What kind of a marriage is that?'

Garv wasn't in the mood for any moral or philosophical conversations.

'Does that prove that everything Sukesh told

us was true?' he asked.

'Rekha did confirm that Yahvi died in an accident.'

'But how does this help us get to the boy Rohit saw Yahvi with in a mall?'

'What if Rekha knows something about

Yahvi's fling?'

Garv didn't like the word 'fling', but he didn't react.

'You think you will be able to get that out of her?'

'I can try. We don't have any other option, do we?'

Garv knew they didn't. Chances of finding Rohit seemed slim unless he involved the police.

And he knew he couldn't afford to do that.

Six days later, Anika was in a salon with Rekha.

She had made it a point to become friendly with her. She had done her research on social media and found common ground to initiate conversations. They had met a couple of times over brunch. Anika had told her that she too

was thinking of getting breast implants and that brought them closer. But Anika was careful to steer clear of Sukesh. Garv asked her a few times if she had found anything but she told him to be patient.

Both women were sitting next to each other, treating themselves to pedicures, when Anika suddenly brought up the subject of infidelity.

'I don't know why people have to look outside marriage for pleasure,' Anika said.

Rekha, who was flipping through a fashion magazine, closed it and, looking at Anika in the mirror in front of them, said, 'God knows. Even I haven't been able to understand it.'

Anika knew it wouldn't be difficult from here on. She had cooked up a story with elements from Yahvi's life: 'One of my colleagues, a married woman, is having an affair with a boy who is like eight years younger to her. I mean, what's wrong with her?' She sounded genuinely prudish, as if it was her real character trait.

Rekha was quiet for some time and then

said, 'That's the new fad I think, for women of our age. To have a younger boyfriend outside marriage.'

'Is it? Do you know others who are into it?'

'Hmm.' Rekha stayed tight-lipped. Anika was thinking of ways to get the information out of her when she had a brilliant idea.

'I too had a friend who was in a similar situation.

Maybe you know her,' Anika added the last bit intentionally, stressing on every word.

Rekha glanced at her and said, 'Let's not take names but how much do you know?'

That's it, Anika thought and said aloud, 'That she was having an affair with a younger man.'

By now both knew who 'she' was.

'Twenty-two years old,' Rekha said.

'What are you saying? Where did she meet him? Dating apps?'

'No,' Rekha said and added, 'Wakankar Tennis Academy. Both used to learn tennis there. I don't know how it helped her. I sometimes feel blessed to be in a happy marriage ...' Rekha blabbered

on for the next five minutes to make her opinion on infidelity clear. Anika's pedicure was done, so she excused herself to go to the washroom and then she messaged Garv.

We need to meet ASAP. I got what you need.

23 November-21 December 2018

After the last decision of ours, I felt like someone who had seen a sunrise after years of living in darkness. The darkness wasn't because of the lows of our love life. It was because there were no highs any more. Monotony flattens the relationship curve. It makes everything you once

found beautiful seem repetitive, and because you have the same experiences over and over again, they no longer remain potent enough to arrest your attention. The mind begins to wander.

The heart begins to seek. What? Nobody knows, till a sunrise comes into view. Yahvi was that sunrise for me. She made me look forward to my tomorrows and taught me how to live my todays better. Sometimes I wonder why I didn't meet Yahvi before. Perhaps Yahvi and I were meant to meet at this juncture. Perhaps we had to be prepared for each other. Perhaps ... when one tries to find reasons for something which has already happened, the list can go on and on.

How does it matter why it happened? The more pertinent question is whether I'm happy that it happened. I am. Whether I'm going to treasure it. I will. The rest is inconsequential.

The question before us was simple: How would we prepare our respective partners so they wouldn't have a mental breakdown once we disappeared from their lives? We did talk a lot about it on the phone and whenever we met in the last one month. Yahvi started teaching her husband (whose name I never asked and she never told me) basic domestic chores like

cooking, how to operate the washing machine, the dishwasher, etc., but I didn't have to teach Nihira anything. She anyway wasn't living with me. It was then that Yahvi and I realized that we didn't have to teach them how to manage a household, but convince them that they were self-dependent, that there was a world beyond us for them as well. Yahvi urged her husband to go on a trip with his friends, and began asking him if he found any girl attractive and what not. I also did the same with Nihira. In fact, she ended up going for dinner with a friend's friend who had been asking her out for some time. She told me she was in two minds because she was not sure if I

would like it or not. When she came back from the dinner and narrated what all had happened over the phone, I realized how our partners were bound by our insecurities. How we had become each other's prisoners, whereas one should be able to feel totally free in a relationship.

To choose. To be. My eyes turned moist when Nihira asked me if it was wrong to be attracted

physically to someone when your soul belonged to someone else. I could only tell her that anything we couldn't justify to ourselves was wrong. Everything else was right.

Every time Yahvi and I met, during the last month, to discuss the progression of emotional self-dependency in our respective partners, I felt I could sense a tiny bit of Nihira in her. I know it's weird. I'll tell you how it started. We'd met in the first week of December for an hour. Yahvi had asked me not to have lunch. It was obvious, since we were meeting for lunch. But when we met, she surprised me by telling me she had got lunch for us. This was the first time she cooked for me. Nothing fancy. Simple daal, rice and bhindi fry. When I tasted the food, I thought of Nihira. It tasted exactly how she would make it.

And I had thought nobody could match Nihira's skills when it came to simple, soulful food.

It gave me immense satisfaction to know that there were some bits of Nihira in Yahvi.

That I wasn't seeking a totally different person

altogether. I was seeking a different value in the same kind of person. I could use that realization to justify the disappearance from Nihira's life. I realized how much I needed it to feel good about myself. I didn't tell Yahvi about this realization, though. When she asked me how the food was, I don't know why I hugged her and cried. It was catharsis. I hadn't cried like that for a long, long time. Maybe it was my way of letting Nihira go, even though I knew I would continue to look for her in Yahvi. I hadn't severed such an intrinsic part of my existence before. 'Nihira and I'

were history from there on. Everything we had shared-highs, lows, happiness, sadness, suffering, failures, successes, smiles, tears-would all be bundled into one moment and framed on the wall of time in the name of memory.

30

PRESENT

They had planned to meet in a cafe but an urgent work meeting came up and the plan had

to be altered. Garv told Anika to wait for him in the office parking lot. Anika obliged. She messaged him when she was about to enter.

Anika parked her car but did not get out. She switched on the AC and waited for Garv to come.

Half a minute later, she saw Garv walking into the lane where her car was parked. She honked to grab his attention. He turned and quickly made his way towards her car, got in and without wasting time said, 'What did you find?'

Anika could see the urgency in his eyes.

'Yahvi was having an affair with a young man.

He is twenty-two years old. His name is Vansh Rana and he used to play tennis with her at some Wakankar Tennis Academy.'

Garv's heart sank. Yahvi's *words-you are my first outside marriage-echoed* in his mind. And each word felt like a slap. He knew the tennis academy Anika had mentioned. Its full name was Mandar Wakankar Tennis Academy. One of his colleagues from the industry who was also a friend, Dipesh Agarwal, the developer of a

mobile wallet app, used to go there for his tennis sessions. He'd invited Garv many times, but tennis had never excited him as a sport.

'Are you all right?' Anika asked, realizing Garv had sunk into silence.

'Yeah.' Garv wasn't all right but this was not the time to feel bad. 'Did Rekha mention any timeline?'

'Rekha got to know him last year around August.

She doesn't know when the affair began.'

'Did Yahvi tell Rekha this herself?'

'No. Rekha spotted them in the smoking zone of a pub, cosyng up to each other. When she asked her, Yahvi confessed and asked her to keep it confidential.'

Now that he thought about it, Garv realized that he and Yahvi never went to pubs and nightclubs together. He did propose it once but Yahvi told him that her husband might spot them and get suspicious. Hence, they dropped the plan. He never brought it up again. And now after hearing this little story of Vansh and Yahvi getting

intimate in pubs, Garv didn't know if he should feel bad about himself or simply laugh at the irony.

'Anything else?' he asked.

'This is all I could get.'

'Hmm. Thanks, Anika. See you later,' he said and got out of her car. Anika's gaze followed his car as it disappeared out of the parking lot, and then she sat still for some time, hoping she was wrong. That he wasn't as damaged as he had seemed.

Once in office, sitting by the window in his cabin with a black coffee, Garv opened Yahvi's Instagram profile. It wasn't difficult to find Vansh Rana in her 'following' list. Vansh was also following her. Garv noticed Vansh was pretty popular. He had 750K followers and his profile even had the blue tick verification mark.

As he read Vansh's bio, he realized he was a national-level tennis player and had also appeared in a couple of youth reality shows.

He checked the date on Yahvi's lumberjacket picture, and then checked Vansh's posts around

that time. She had uploaded the photo on 06-06-2018 at 4.45 p.m. One of Vansh's posts from May and another from June had him wearing a lumberjacket which looked exactly like the one Yahvi was wearing. Garv was still willing to give her the benefit of doubt until he magnified the picture and spotted a bougainvillea plant peeping into the frame. In one of his posts from May 2018, Vansh was in a vest, showing off his toned biceps. On closer inspection, Garv spotted the same bougainvillea. Garv kept the phone on the table and leaned back. There was no doubt that Vansh and Yahvi were involved with each other. Yahvi was wearing Vansh's lumberjacket and was at his place when the photo was taken.

It struck Garv that the gym video was also shot around the same time. He had noticed the timestamp on it. Rohit had started blackmailing Yahvi after that. Perhaps he was stalking Yahvi and had seen her with Vansh, the young man.

Maybe he didn't know who Vansh was, that's why he never mentioned him. Rohit must have

understood that Yahvi already had a boyfriend outside marriage and hence wouldn't give in to him. Or was she never interested in Rohit?

Looking at the busy street below his office, Garv took a sip from his coffee mug but realized it was empty. He kept the mug aside and picked up his phone again. He went through Vansh's posts with a fine-tooth comb in the hope of getting even the slightest clue about Yahvi's abrupt death.

Later that day, after finishing a meeting on logistics and sorting out a few issues in the customer service department, Garv went to the recreational area in his office to unwind for a while. He joined another employee in a game of table hockey. But he couldn't concentrate as all those meetings with Yahvi flashed through his mind. If they had actually disappeared from their

partners' lives, they would have been in Santorini right now. Their idea was to set up a small cafe. And make just enough profit to have a comfortable lifestyle. He had full faith in his

entrepreneurial skills and knew he would be able to pull it off. Apart from this, they didn't really have a plan on how they would live. *We will be enough for each other*, she'd said. *That sounds good only in romance novels. It doesn't work like that in real life*, he thought. Also, what was the guarantee that in due course monotony wouldn't set in between them?

As Garv won the round of table hockey, he thought he heard someone sniggering. He turned around and spotted Pravin, the CFO, and another employee, Suraj, at the table tennis table. They looked away, as if nothing had happened.

Later, after lunch, Pravin and Suraj were gossiping in the washroom.

'How can you be sure?' Suraj asked.

'I just know it when I see it. I'm sure he is fucking Anika,' Pravin said, relieving himself in the urinal.

'But our boss doesn't seem that kind,' Suraj argued.

'The ones who don't look it are the ones who do it. Tell me, do I look like a whore banger?'

Suraj gave Pravin an awkward look and went to wash his hands.

'I don't have a problem if they are fucking. I'm waiting to fuck her too. Don't you think she resembles that porn star ... '

They walked out of the washroom while continuing the conversation. Neither of them knew that Garv was inside one of the cubicles. He had heard all of it and recognized their voices. He also left the washroom shortly.

Garv had a meeting with Pravin right after lunch, but before that he went to his cabin and asked the HR head to come over. A few seconds later, Saniya

Majhi knocked at the door. Garv gestured her to come in. She did and took a seat opposite him.

'Saniya, I want you to start lining up interviews for CFO candidates.'

'Is Pravin leaving?'

'How long is our notice period?'

'Two months, sir.'

'Issue a letter by tomorrow and mark me in the email as well. Reduce his notice period to a week.'

Saniya looked stunned as she said, 'What's the reason for firing him?'

'Misconduct.'

'Right, sir,' she said and was about to get up when she heard Garv speak again.

'Please add a new clause to our company policy. Any kind of comments or action, intentional or otherwise, anywhere within the office premises, even if it's the fucking washroom, that outrage a woman's modesty in any manner will be dealt with immediate and strict action.'

Saniya flashed a smile and said, 'I will send out the email first thing tomorrow morning, sir.'

'We need people with not only good skills but also the right mindset,' he said.

'Absolutely, sir.'

'Thanks, Saniya. Also, please don't use the word "fucking" in the new clause.'

'Of course, sir,' she said and walked out of his cabin.

Right after office, Garv drove to the tennis academy.

He had called his friend Dipesh from office, who had told him that he was in the academy every alternate day from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m ..

He was waiting for him in the lobby when Garv walked in. Dipesh was done with his session. He complained about Garv not meeting him often and skipping a lot of drinking sessions that the other group members planned from time to time. Garv apologized, made small talk and then steered the discussion to what he was there for.

'I need a favour.'

'Why else would you meet me, huh?' Dipesh said. Garv knew he had a sarcastic sense of humour.

So he didn't mind the comment.

'I need some information about two people who signed up in this academy last year.'

'Why, are you opening a private detective agency?' Dipesh laughed. Garv smiled. He knew

he couldn't mention Vansh's name. Chances were Dipesh knew him since Vansh was a national-level player. He heard Dipesh shout out a name, looking towards the reception.

'Rakesh!'

A man came running and greeted him.

'He is my man,' Dipesh told Rakesh, holding Garv by his shoulder. 'He needs some information.

Please help him.'

'Certainly, sir.'

'Thanks, Dipesh,' Garv said.

'Just get your ass to one of the drinking sessions.

I have to go now. Hope to see you soon.'

'I promise.'

They hugged each other. Dipesh left, while Garv followed Rakesh to the reception.

'What can I do for you, sir?' Rakesh asked.

'I want to know if someone by the name of Yahvi Goel had enrolled here.' Garv came straight to the point.

Rakesh looked at him. Garv sensed a strange uneasiness about him, probably because the

club's employees weren't allowed to give anyone information about its members.

'Good to know you are Dipesh sir's friend,'

Rakesh said. And then added, 'But please don't tell anyone I gave you the information.'

'Don't worry, I won't.'

'Thank you, sir. Please come with me,' Rakesh said and led Garv to a small adjacent room. One look and Garv understood it was their accounts room. There was a wooden partition with a glass front. Rakesh went to the other side of it. Garv stood before the glass front and saw Rakesh open one of the old steel almirahs. A few seconds later, he took out a file and came to Garv.

'Our records are arranged alphabetically. This one has everyone whose name starts with Y,'

Rakesh said, handing over the file to him. Garv quickly flipped through and saw Yahvi's name in it. The address matched that of Swagat's. He noticed that the date of enrolment was March 2017.

'I need Vansh Rana's records as well.'

'Vansh sir and Yahvi ma'am used to come and leave together. I miss them as they always brought gifts for my daughter. She'd met them once here.'

'When did they come here last?'

Rakesh thought for a few seconds and said,

'It's been a while.'

'Even Vansh?'

'I don't think he has ever missed his sessions for this long.'

'Vansh also enrolled around March 2017?'

'No, no. Vansh sir has been coming for five to six years. But after Yahvi ma'am joined, he started accompanying her.'

Garv was lost in thought for a few seconds.

'Anything else, sir?' Rakesh asked. Garv nodded and gave him two 500 rupee notes. Rakesh seemed embarrassed initially but then slowly pocketed the money. Garv got back to his car and messaged Anika.

If it's not a problem, can we meet now?

Sure. Where?

The Irish House, Viman Nagar?

Will be there in an hour.

Anika was on her way home from office. As she took a U-turn for the cafe and stopped at a signal, she again thought about the matter that had been troubling her for the past few days. *Should I confess to Garv?* she thought. The truth, like all truths, was destructive. The signal turned green. As she stepped on the accelerator, she told herself that she would decide once she met him in an hour.

31

30 December 2018

It was easily the strangest day of my life. I felt like a villain as well as a hero. I felt liberated as well as confined. I loved and hated myself at the same time. I had never felt such dichotomy within me before. It all started when the doorbell rang in the morning. I opened the door to find Yahvi there. For a moment, I thought it was some lucid dream. Everything seemed real but I felt like if I touched anything, it would all dissolve.

I was convinced that she was really there only when she spoke.

'How did you know where I live?' I asked.

'I would have invited you inside if you were standing at my door,' she said.

I was too taken aback, I guess, to adhere to basic etiquette. I moved aside saying, 'Please come in.' She did. I closed the door behind her.

We were physically intimate, we were in love, we had plans of eloping, but we had never even considered visiting each other's homes. She had never seemed very comfortable talking about her home, so I had never brought it up.

'I did something the last time we met which I didn't tell you about,' she said, settling down on the couch.

'What?' I asked as I went towards the kitchen to get her a glass of water.

'You don't have to be all formal,' she said, taking the glass from my hand and emptying it in one go.

'What did you do?' I egged her on.

'I followed you after we said our goodbyes.

And then it wasn't that difficult to find out where exactly you lived in DFL Enclave.'

'You could have told me. I would have tidied up.'

'Why? I don't mind it,' she said. She looked around. Her gaze stopped on a framed photo of Nihira and me.

'May I?' she asked.

'Sure.'

Yahvi picked up the frame and looked at the photograph closely. As if she was inspecting it.

'Nihira, my wife,' I said. I felt guilty saying Nihira's name in front of her. Why exactly, I didn't know. Yahvi didn't say anything. She traced its outline with her finger and then kept it back.

Looking around, she said, 'Won't you show me around?'

'Of course.' I stood up. So did she.

I took her to the kitchen. She touched the dishes, the cutlery, the appliances, as if she was imprinting them in her memory. She stopped beside the coffee machine. I had told her many

times over morning texts that I was preparing my coffee while talking to her.

Next, I took her to the bedroom. She stared at the bed for a few seconds. There was an awkward silence. I didn't know if I was expected to say something. I thought if I went into the study, it would divert her attention. But as I started walking, she asked me something and I froze.

'This is where you and Nihira make love?' she said. I didn't know if it was a rhetorical question or she expected me to say something in response.

I chose to remain quiet.

'Could you please get my phone? I left it in the drawing room,' she said. I was happy to find a reason to leave the bedroom. When I came back, I paused by the door. Yahvi was on the bed, naked.

'Make love to me, Garv,' she said. I don't know what happened to me. It was like I was amidst a storm, which had taken away my power of thinking or decision-making. All I could do was

go with it. And the storm pulled me towards Yahvi. She stripped me, pulled me on to the bed

-Nihira and my nuptial bed-and we made love.

Once we were done, she got up, pulling the bed cover with her, and opened the door to the balcony.

She went out, I followed. We stayed there for a while, in each other's arms. We didn't talk.

The concept of home is ingrained in us to such an extent, I thought, that even a minute possibility of it makes us hold on to it, regardless of how gypsy or bohemian we are at heart. I wasn't very comfortable being with Yahvi at my place.

And yet I knew she was the one I was planning to disappear with. Why was I feeling bad about letting go of my life with Nihira when I had already made my decision? I didn't know if Yahvi felt the same way or not, but I was crying inside.

A part of me wanted to confess to Nihira that I was leaving her for Yahvi. But the other part, which knew Nihira would never be able to accept it, overpowered it. I had to answer a simple

question to justify my plan with Yahvi: Was she worth it? I found myself tightening my grasp around her, as if all the answers of the heart lay in the way you physically possessed someone.

32

PRESENT

Anika located Garv the moment she entered The Irish House. He was sitting at a small corner table, nursing a drink. A staff member walked up to her, flashing a smile.

'May I help you with a table, ma'am?'

'No, I'm good. My friend is waiting for me,' she said. Anika took a deep breath and walked towards Garv.

'**Hi**, how come you asked me out for a drink tonight?' she asked. By then she'd decided she would not tell him the truth.

'I'm sorry. I just wanted to drink and I ordered ... ' Garv stood up and sat down once Anika had settled down. He raised his hand. A waiter came to the table.

'Vodka with orange juice, please,' Anika said.

'Get something to eat?' Garv asked.

'Some chicken wings maybe,' she said. The waiter went away.

'I'm sorry but I have to ask you this. Has Pravin quit?' Anika asked.

',Why, what happened?' Garv asked. He waited for Anika's drink to arrive before taking a sip from his.

'Heard some people talking about it. Hushhush talks, you know.'

',Veil, yes, I fired him.'

'Hmm.' Anika caught the conclusiveness in Garv's voice. She took the hint and didn't ask him any more questions.

'So, what made you ask me out? Did you learn anything new?' she asked.

Her drink arrived. They clinked their glasses before Garv launched into what happened at the academy and what he found there.

'So Vansh Rana hasn't been to the academy since Yahvi's death,' Anika said and added, 'Don't you think that's fishy and kind of answers a few things?'

'I do.'

'Have you thought about our next step?'

Garv appreciated how Anika had made this chase her own. This time she didn't even ask for anything in return.

'You know, Anika, the thing with me is that I have never been able to beat around the bush.

I'm sure it's a skill many have, but, unfortunately, I don't possess it. Thus, I will stick to being straight. I loved Yahvi.'

Anika understood that Garv was already a little drunk. She quietly took on the role of a listener, folded her arms and leaned slightly forward, her expression serious and intent.

'She loved me too, or at least that's what she told me, and made me believe so in the last several months. I was ready to leave my wife for her. Can you believe it? At my age and ma-turity, deciding something like that? I know a lot of people do it. But honestly, I never thought I would be one of them. Everything was all

right between Nihira and me. And yet ... ' Garv finished his drink, waved at the waiter and gestured for a refill.

Anika sipped her vodka cautiously, knowing one of them was already losing it, and someone had to be sober to take care of things.

'When I heard Yahvi died of a disease and then discovered she was probably killed, I thought it was my duty as someone who genuinely loved her to find out who did it and bring them to justice, but the more I delved into it, the more I discovered things which repeatedly damaged the image I had of her when she was with me.'

'You mean the multiple affairs?' Anika smoothly slid her query in.

'It's not that. It's the lies. I was never aware of them. Not that she was obligated to tell me about all her affairs but she should have at least told me the truth when I asked her direct questions.'

They drank in silence while the place continued to buzz with a live musical performance.

When Anika looked at Garv, she didn't see the boss who had his life sorted out or the man she admired for being a gentleman. She saw a broken man. She could almost see the bruises that love had given him.

'I know we should get in touch with Vansh. I checked his Instagram. It's pretty obvious she used to frequent his place. The lumberjacket she is wearing in one of her photos is his. And the fact that he hasn't posted anything since she died and his absence from the academy tells me he may be involved.'

Anika grasped his hand. Garv averted his eyes from his glass to look at her hand.

'You don't want to find out who killed the one you loved?'

'I want to but ... '

'I understand. You are scared of what you might unearth about her in the process. You are scared that you might not like what you discover and you might stop loving her altogether.'

This time Garv glanced at her. That was it. His

fear. Spelt out loud and clear. And he was glad he wasn't the one who had said it.

'But you might uncover a bigger truth than the truth of her being killed.'

", Which is?"

'That maybe she was involved with multiple men, but it was only with you she found peace?'

Neither spoke after that. They quietly finished their drinks, Garv paid up and they both ambled to the exit.

'Are you sure you can drive?' Anika asked, giving her parking token to the valet.

'I got a driver,' Garv mumbled.

A moment later, he said, 'Can I ask you something?'

'Sure.'

'Why didn't you ask for anything in return this time?'

Anika's car had arrived.

'We'll talk about it later,' Anika said and got in.

One more second, and her eyes would have become moist, which she didn't want him to see.

The next two weeks were very busy for Garv and his team. His company, Appetito, a food aggregator, was organizing an event as part of its corporate social responsibility programme, where NGOs working with underprivileged children had been invited. They were also bringing along the kids they worked with. One of the biggest marriage halls in the city had been booked for the event. The police were also there to ensure decorum.

Special arrangements had been made for those on duty, especially the traffic police, who slogged day and night. Anika was responsible for the media coverage. She didn't disappoint Garv. Apart from the local newspapers, journalists from a few national outlets were also covering the event. They had been allotted time slots to interview Garv.

In the past week, Garv had found solace in working long hours, attending relentless work calls and finally hitting the bed at night, totally exhausted, with no time to think. On the day of the event, when Garv visited the hall, he was

happy with his core team's efforts and promised them a treat. As he went around checking the arrangements, he met several police constables and officers who hailed his efforts and asked him to do such events more frequently. Garv promised them he would try his best to pull this off once every quarter, starting next year. A traffic police officer, Gopinath Tarde, was looking at him expectantly, so Garv struck up a conversation with him.

'I hope you liked the food,' Garv asked.

'I loved it. Thank you so much for thinking about us. Nobody does.'

'It's my honour and privilege to serve the people who take care of the city,' Garv said with a smile.

'One of my colleagues was saying you employ a lot of young people.'

'Not a lot as we are still not that big. But a young force, I feel, brings in a certain energy which is important for every entrepreneurial venture.'

'You are right. My son is pursuing his MBA from an institute which doesn't have campus placements. He is a good student but I couldn't afford any of those fancy colleges. He has two sisters and a younger brother as well.'

Garv understood what he was hinting at.

','Why don't you ask your son to meet me at my office?'

'That's so nice of you. When should I ask him to meet you?' a hopeful Tar de asked.

Garv quickly looked at his schedule on his phone and said, 'How about day after, 3 p.m. ?'

'Sure, I will tell him. Thank you so much.'

Garv held out his right hand, which Gopinath shook with much enthusiasm.

That night, Garv thought he would sleep peacefully, but he woke up with a start in the middle of the night, sweat trickling down his face. He had a dream where Yahvi and he were on an exotic beach. He was helplessly standing on the shore, while she was struggling in the sea, crying for help as the waves took her away from

him. When the waves returned, they got with them her broken Samsonite, which he had seen the first time they had met at the Bengaluru airport. The dream had seemed so real that his heart was racing. He went back to sleep, albeit fitfully.

The day after, sharp at 3 p.m., Gopinath reached Garv's office with his son in tow. Garv took a look at his CV, called Saniya in and asked her to interview him. As Gopinath took his leave, he told Garv that if he ever needed any help, he could always give him a call. Garv nodded, a smile playing on his lips. However, a few minutes after he had left, something struck Garv and he rushed downstairs. Gopinath was just getting ready to leave. He killed his bike's engine when he saw Garv.

"A/hat happened, sir?" he asked.

'Gopinathji, I needed a favour. Some information really.'

'Tell me, what is it?'

'A friend of mine died a few months ago in a

car accident. Her husband must have reported it. I want to know the model of the car that hit her or the plate number. Something on those lines.'

Gopinath thought for a few seconds and said,

'Please WhatsApp me the details. And I'll get back with the information.'

'Thank you, Gopinathji. I'll WhatsApp them right away.'

;-.....J

Gopinath called him the next morning. What he told him made Garv's heart beat wildly.

'There's no police record of a car accident involving Yahvi Goel in the last one year. I checked not only the police station you suggested but more than half the police stations in Pune.'

Garv, who was having breakfast when the phone call came, left it unfinished. He had lost his appetite.

In office, he messaged Anika to come out to the parking lot. 'Listen carefully and answer as honestly as you can. If your partner died in a car

accident, would you lodge a police complaint or not? Take your time, think and then tell me,' he told her.

'There's nothing to think. The kind of rage I would feel, I would not only lodge a complaint but make sure the person is brought to book,'

Anika said almost immediately.

'Swagat hasn't reported Yahvi's death,' Garv said.

Anika looked like she was connecting the dots for a few seconds and then her eyes became wide with horror.

'Oh god. Does that mean ... ' her voice trailed away.

Garv nodded and said, 'I'm afraid right now it only means the obvious.'

",What do we do now?' Anika asked.

'I want to know Swagat's version. Why would he not report it to the police.'

Anika looked at Garv, waiting for him to tell her the plan. Eight hours later, they were in Garv's car, which was parked opposite Yahvi's

colony gate.

Anika let out a deep sigh and got out.

'Try not to arouse suspicion,' Garv reminded her. Anika nodded and crossed the road to go inside the colony. She was stopped by a guard, Garv could see, but he let her go the next second.

A couple of minutes later, Garv received a message on WhatsApp. A frown creased his forehead as he read it. It was from Anika. She had sent a photograph of the main door of Swagat Goel's flat. He could see the nameplate, the flat number and a lock hanging from the latch. A big laminated note was pasted right on top. It read: *Shifted to the US. Please leave any courier/parcel at flat number 303.*

A man shifting to the US in normal circumstances is okay. But a man whose wife has just died in an accident, which wasn't even reported, shifting to the US seems highly suspicious, he thought.

33

5 January-21 February 2019

Yahvi and I last met on 5 January. That night

itself, she had a flight to the US with her husband.

She was going there for a month to visit her elder brother and sister-in-law as they had had a baby in November. I knew she was going temporarily, but the pain I felt, thinking of the long separation, was acute. I knew we wouldn't be able to talk freely. The time difference would make it really difficult. When she would be free, I would be in office. When I would be free at night, she would be busy. The nights were particularly difficult. Much more than I had thought. With Nihira attending a fifteen-day

workshop in Ooty, there was nothing to look forward to in the evenings. I did try to get back to dating apps, not to meet anybody, but to have random conversations and kill time, but nobody seemed interesting enough. I deleted the apps. Nihira pestered me to join her in Ooty, and I considered it as well but backed out at the last moment. I wasn't ready to face her. I told myself that if I was to go ahead with the plan with Yahvi, which I was, then it was better that

I didn't meet Nihira in person. Sometimes, our suffering is because of the choices someone close to us makes. Nihira would learn this, I knew, once Yahvi and I disappeared. But knowing I was going to leave her soon, I couldn't bring myself to enjoy an impromptu holiday with her.

There were a few things to be done, though, like booking our tickets from Mumbai to Santorini and an Airbnb for the initial months. To avoid any suspicions, Yahvi suggested we book our own tickets and get visas separately. I also made some legal papers in Nihira's name. I only took a part of my money. The rest was for her.

Even the company remained with her. I managed to finish all the paperwork on time.

Yahvi came back from the US in the first week of February, but had to immediately leave for Ahmedabad for a family wedding on her husband's side. When she came back, she fell sick.

Seasonal flu. I thought our plan would get postponed.

I was okay with that but the flight tickets would have to be rebooked. I was also running

out of patience. I just had to see her, meet her, talk to her in person. I told her on chat that I could come to her house as a delivery person, see her once and leave. I agree it sounded lame and childish but I was desperate. But she didn't agree. I didn't push after that. I asked for a video call but she said her husband was home all the time since she wasn't keeping well. So that too was chucked aside. In the end, I decided to surrender to destiny and sit tight.

Finally, we met today. I thought she would hug me. I was ready for it but she didn't. It troubled me but I chose to focus on the bright side. She was finally in front of me. I could sense some hesitation in her. Was it because we were meeting after so long? Maybe. When I asked her if everything was all right, she said she was nervous about what was coming up. Our plan to elope. I understood. Even I was nervous. Maybe that's why I wanted the hug so badly.

While talking to her that day, I realized people express and behave in different ways when they

are in love. We get upset when our ways don't match the other person's. We always look at it from our own point of view. Like I would surely have hugged her if I was feeling nervous. But she didn't. She preferred to keep a certain distance.

In fact, she told me later on text that it was a conscious decision. She was fragile and didn't want to break down because that, she thought, could have deterred us. When she was in Ahmedabad, she met her parents, who had travelled from Gwalior for the wedding. And since then the thought of leaving them and never seeing them again had been haunting her. She could disappear from her husband's life but would she be able to disappear from her parents'? I too had wondered about my parents and what they would think of me once I left. And then I arrived at a conclusion, which I shared with Yahvi as well, that it was not possible to make everyone around us happy. That way we would never be able to take any decision in life. We couldn't live a dream and be aware of reality as well. And it

wasn't like Nihira or Yahvi's husband wouldn't be able to track us down. We weren't fugitives on a run. We were 'disappearing' because we didn't want to go through the legal shit. And this was a message to them that they too were free to choose the life they wanted for themselves.

No baggage. It sounded a little far-fetched, no doubt, but then I thought Yahvi and I were doing it because somewhere deep inside we both wanted such an adventure. Something other people might not even consider or may just fantasize about, but we were going through with it.

We were going to live it. And we were going to tell our kids about it. It was a story which was worth a risk.

In the end, I messaged Yahvi one simple question:

Are you ready to leave everything for me? Think and answer.

I found it slightly ironical that she was the one who had come up with the idea to begin with and now I was the one asking her this question.

It was like she had dreamt it and now I was more convinced about the dream than she was. The blue tick appeared below the message. But there was no answer. My heart was racing as I waited for her to type. Then her 'online' status changed to 'typing ... ' A few seconds later, her reply came:

Yes, I'm ready.

Three days later, on 25 February, we were supposed to meet at a dhaba outside Pune from where we would drive to Mumbai, park my car in a mall and then take a cab to the international airport.

34

PRESENT

'Where are we left with now?' Anika asked as Garv took a U-turn and drove off from Yahvi's lane. He didn't reply to her immediately. As his car hit the main road, he said, 'Only Vansh Rana is left.'

'Hmm.'

'But when you were there the last time,' Garv

asked, changing gears, 'did you feel like Swagat was preparing to shift?'

Anika thought for some time and then said, 'I don't think I saw anything which could be a clue.'

But then generally people either sell off their stuff or just let it be in the flat, perhaps cover it all up, before shifting to another continent.'

Anika had a point. Neither she nor Garv spoke for the rest of the way to Anika's apartment.

'If you want I can somehow get in touch with Vansh and ... ' Anika said as she got out of the car.

'Thank you so much, Anika. I already feel guilty for making you a part of all this,' Garv said.

'Why don't you see it this way? I'm a part of this because I was supposed to be a part of this.'

'You are a kind soul,' Garv said.

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'Thank you. Just being myself.'

'The most difficult thing to do anyway.'

'Before we digress, should I ... 1

'Not now. Let me see. I can get Vansh's address, but I'm not sure if it's safe to ask Vansh about Yahvi. If he has killed her, he will be on the alert.'

'Then?'

'Let me think it out a bit,' Garv said.

'Sure. And take care. You look a bit ... ' she paused as if searching for the right word and said, 'tired.' Garv gave her a tight smile and drove away. He was indeed tired of being lost in this labyrinth. When he came to know Yahvi had possibly been murdered, he thought he would get to the bottom of it and try his best to bring the one responsible to justice. But he wasn't ready for the information he unravelled during the investigation. It was like deconstructing an idol which he had already made.

And in the process, something within him was also breaking, altering, transforming. Anika had guessed right. A part of him was tired. Tired of the pain he carried in his heart since Yahvi went away. Perhaps he wouldn't have questioned the foundation of that pain if Yahvi's other side, the

one he was unaware of till now, had remained a secret. He had checked her Instagram, had talked to her supposed lovers, but nobody had mentioned *him*. Even Rekha knew about Vansh but not about him. A person doesn't discuss his or her intimate relationships with a third person under two conditions: one, the relationship is not that important; second, it is too important and intimate to share with a third person. The consolation prize for Garv was that Yahvi would have actually 'disappeared' with him, had she not postponed the plan. But he wondered if that had something to do with her death. Did her husband come to know? Did he kill her and make it look like an accident because he couldn't take the betrayal? Why else would he not file a police complaint? Was it because getting involved with the police was a hassle and it wouldn't bring his wife back? But there was something called recompense as well. Garv was overwhelmed by the unending questions and banged his head against the bedpost out of

frustration.

It didn't take long for Garv to secure Vansh Rana's address. He called the tennis academy and asked for Rakesh, who gave him the address within a few minutes. That was the simple part.

The difficult part was approaching Vansh in a way that didn't arouse suspicion. Sending Anika to him could be dangerous. Just because they got lucky with Sukesh once didn't mean Vansh too would turn out to be harmless.

A day later, Garv's social media team came to him with a proposal for a weekly contest. The idea was to feature customers who had placed the maximum number of orders using the Appetite app in the last one month and crown them the 'Food Stars of the Month', with the winners getting some freebies. The team felt that it would also attract wide publicity and more traffic on the app as today's generation was fame-hungry. Garv liked

the idea. The team started to detail out the proposal in front of him, but Garv had something else in mind. He

stopped the meeting midway and asked them to come back after an hour. He then messaged Anika to meet him in the boardroom in fifteen minutes. He also asked the logistics team to get him some specific information.

Anika was already waiting in the boardroom when Garv entered. She had made herself comfortable in one of the chairs. Garv came straight to the point and told her what he had in mind.

Anika took a couple of minutes to absorb the idea, tried to think if there could be any dangerous ramifications of it and then said, 'I think it's worth a try. If he takes action against the company, we can always say we didn't do anything.'

'Precisely what I have in mind. We have to lie to get to the truth,' Garv said.

'I concur.'

'I've Vansh Rana's address. I ran it through our database system. It seems he is a regular customer with us, with no complaints till date except for one refund issue a year ago which was handled well by one of our customer service

representatives to whom Vansh gave a 5-star rating.'

'Then what are we waiting for? Let's do this,'

Anika said.

Vansh Rana had been depressed since Yahvi disappeared from his life. He stopped playing tennis or taking calls from his friends and coach. It was a mechanical existence for him.

Every day, he would wake up in the afternoon, order food from Appetito, play on his X-box and then work out like a maniac in his homegym.

Evenings were reserved for the bottle and nostalgia. Vansh intentionally avoided being on social media as well.

This was his first heartbreak, and it seemed to have overpowered his zest for life. His parents lived in Singapore and were unaware of their son's state of mind. Vansh would put up a brave face during their video calls. But later he would break down and cry his eyes out. One day, his man Friday called up his parents and told them everything. They immediately called the family

doctor and asked him to suggest a counsellor.

From then on, Vansh started going for counselling sessions a couple of times a week. But soon he started faking his condition and lying to his therapist. He had stepped into the most dangerous phase of depression; a phase where he had started enjoying his condition and refused to help himself because he found comfort in his pain and sadness.

Vansh had woken late as usual. He was sitting on his bed, lost in thought, when he saw his man Friday enter his room with a glass of fresh fruit juice. Vansh took the glass from him and threw it away, asking him to never bring him anything healthy. He then ordered food from Appetite and went to the washroom to relieve himself. By the time he was back in his room, the food had arrived. As he opened the container, a pamphlet fell out. It was from Appetite, detailing the Food Star of the Month competition and urging people to participate. Vansh crushed it into a ball and kept it aside. After a second, he thought he

saw something scribbled on it, so he straightened it out. There was a message, which read: *Why did you do this to me? We can meet and talk if you want to. 4 p.m. Season's Mall basement parking-Yahvi.*

Vansh frowned. This was the first time he'd heard from Yahvi since she vanished from his life. He called his man Friday and asked him who had delivered the food.

'A delivery guy, babu,' the man Friday replied.

Vansh scampered to the main door and opened it. The bright light made him squint. He closed the door. He understood that whoever had written it wouldn't be waiting for him outside. He reread the note, his curiosity piqued.

Vansh reached the parking lot of Season's Mall as mentioned on the pamphlet sharp at 4 p.m.

He parked his car and stood leaning against it, darting his curious eyes in all directions. After a few minutes, he saw a woman walking towards him. She wasn't Yahvi.

'I'm sorry to approach you like this,' Anika

said. 'But I had to. For Yahvi's sake.'

Vansh looked around, just to be sure she was alone, and asked, 'Who are you?'

'I'm Yahvi's sister.'

'But Yahvi never mentioned she had a sister.'

Vansh sounded suspicious.

'We are cousins. After her death ... '

The moment Vansh heard the last word, his body started shuddering. He quickly took out a cigarette and, with trembling hands, lit it.

'Yahvi is dead?' he asked. *There was no pretence in his voice*, Garv thought. He was in a car nearby, listening in. Anika had called him and put the phone on mute before approaching Vansh. He was taken aback when Vansh said he didn't know about Yahvi's death. He saw Anika nodding and then heard her speak.

'She died in a car accident.'

'Shit!' Vansh stamped his foot on the ground.

It was clear he couldn't believe his ears. He punched the wall close to him, took multiple drags from the cigarette and then seemed to calm down a bit.

'Was it really an accident?' he asked.

'If it was, I wouldn't be here, Vansh,' Anika said, maintaining her poise.

'It has to be her husband. I know it. That motherfucker was always jealous of us. That's why he used to beat her.'

'Beat her?'

Vansh gave Anika a furtive glance and said, 'I loved her. She loved me. She had promised me she would leave her husband. Marry me.'

Those words were like sharp-edged daggers that slowly made their way into Garv's heart as he sat tight, holding on to the steering wheel.

'Was she in an abusive relationship?' Anika asked.

'How would I know? You are her sister, you should know,' Vansh said, looking at her suspiciously.

'You think if I was some random person, I would know about you and her? She told me about you. And how much she loved you,' Anika said with undeterred confidence. Garv knew

the last bit was necessary to get Vansh's trust.

Vansh paced up and down a bit, with his hands on his waist, as if he was trying to make sense of something, and then he leaned against his car once again. He lit another cigarette and said, 'She always told me how her husband subjected her to physical and mental abuse.'

Garv remembered the wound he had seen on Yahvi's arm once. She herself had told him once that her husband had hit her.

'Before she vanished, she had told me her husband had found out about us. I went mad as she suddenly stopped all communication. All I knew about her was that she was from Mumbai.

No address, no husband's name ... nothing.'

Anika frowned. So did Garv sitting in his car. Yahvi wasn't from Mumbai. She lived with Swagat in Pune. Yahvi's Instagram posts flashed through Garv's mind. Especially the photo that had been clicked on Marine Drive in Mumbai.

Anika talked to Vansh for a couple of more minutes but he didn't say anything new.

'Just take my number,' Anika said. 'In case you remember anything, please do get in touch.' This wasn't a part of the plan. But Anika, after talking to Vansh, realized they couldn't keep writing notes to him to get in touch. Once Vansh drove off, Anika walked towards Garv's car.

She came and sat next to him and said, 'I asked for his number in case we need to get in touch with him in future.' He didn't respond.

She looked at him and saw that he was going through Yahvi's Instagram feed. He opened the Marine Drive post and then the one in which she was reading a newspaper. Garv magnified the photo. It was the *Mumbai Mirror*. There were also a couple of videos of the Khandala tunnel, and some posts of her in different restaurants in Mumbai. He had seen them earlier too and had safely presumed that she must have travelled to Mumbai with her husband, but now Vansh had given a different context to the photographs.

'Do you think Vansh is lying?' Anika asked.

'Why would Yahvi tell him she lived in Mumbai?'

She was lost in thought when she heard Garv laughing. She was taken aback.

'What happened?' she asked.

Garv nodded and said, 'The men aren't lying.

It's the woman who is lying.'

'You mean Yahvi?'

Garv nodded. 'I'm getting late for my meetings.

Are you free in the evening?'

Anika was surprised by the abrupt change in Garv's demeanour. It made her curious.

'Yeah,' she said.

It was around 7.30 p.m. when Garv entered his flat in DFL Enclave along with Anika. They had both come directly from office, with Anika following Garv's car.

'Please make yourself comfortable. And excuse me for a bit,' Garv said and disappeared into the bedroom. Anika sat on the couch and looked around. A digital photo frame, kept on one of the side tables, caught her eye. She picked it up and looked at the photos that appeared in quick succession.

All of them had Garv and ...

'That's my wife, Nihira,' Garv said. Anika noticed he had changed into a casual pair of trousers and T-shirt.

'I guessed that. She is beautiful. And you both look great together.'

'Thanks.'

'Scotch?'

'Sure.'

'We can sit in the balcony,' Garv said and led her out. She noticed a bean bag and a small circular glass table on which there was an ashtray full of

cigarette butts. Garv went inside and returned with two glasses which had a peg of Scotch each, and an icebox. Anika got busy putting everything on the table and helping herself to some ice, while Garv went in and brought out another bean bag. By the time he sat down and lit a cigarette, his drink was ready.

'Thanks,' he said, picking up his glass and clinking it against hers. 'To confessions,' he said.

Anika looked slightly taken aback.

'To confessions,' she repeated.

'I thought about what you said in the car.'

Anika threw him an incredulous glance as she sipped her Scotch.

'That Vansh was lying.'

'Ah, okay.'

After another sip and a drag, Garv said, 'If Vansh was lying, he wouldn't have mentioned the abuse part. Yahvi had told me about it as well. My reading of the situation is ... ' He took another drag. Anika felt like he was bracing himself for something.

'I think Yahvi was in love with everybody and nobody.'

'Why would you say that?' Anika asked, taking out her own packet of cigarettes from her bag.

Garv helped her light one. She now understood why Garv had invited her to his place and what he meant when he raised the toast to 'confessions'.

It was going to be a night where the heart would bleed through words.

'That's because nothing makes much sense.

First, Nihira told me a woman whose name was

Yahvi died in my colony. I obviously thought the name was a coincidence. But it wasn't. Then I found out Yahvi wasn't staying here with her husband. This flat was a love nest. Then came the gym trainer, who told me she didn't die of an ailment but was perhaps killed. To be honest, I wanted to believe something like that to begin with when I couldn't understand why Yahvi had kept her illness a secret. That led me to Swagat, then Vansh, who says she was living in Mumbai.

It's obvious nobody knows the truth. That's because Yahvi didn't want anybody to know the truth.' A pause later, he added, 'Not even me.'

Anika could sense his voice was choked with emotion. She saw him gulp his drink and pour himself another.

'Because of Yahvi's lies, her truth is also gone.'

Garv finished his next drink rather quickly.

He started sharing random instances from his meetings with Yahvi. As if he was in the mood to reminisce about his romance but wanted an audience.

After a couple of hours, Garv suddenly burst out laughing. He was five pegs down.

Anika shrugged, sipping her third.

'Now I get why you didn't ask me for anything in return after the last time.'

'Why?'

'Because you knew I needed you more than you needed me, isn't it? And that I would eventually agree to what you want.'

'And what do I want?' she asked.

'To sleep with me.'

If she didn't know Garv was drunk, she would have taken offence.

'Let me confess something then,' she said and stood up, looking around. Once she was sure nobody was around or looking from any of the adjacent buildings, she started unbuttoning her top.

'I really don't think it's a good idea, Anika.'

Garv blurted. In a flash, Anika took off her top.

For a moment, he didn't move. His eyes were fixed on her bosom.

'What ... what happened to your breasts?' he asked, with shock writ large on his face.

Anika was about to speak up when they both heard the doorbell. Garv looked startled and began walking towards the living room, while Anika quickly wore her top.

Garv couldn't believe his eyes when he looked at the screen attached to the door camera. It was Nihira. She rang the bell a few more times. He opened the door.

'Surprise!' Nihira said excitedly.

'What the hell?' Garv said.

'I knew you would be surprised. But you look scandalized.'

'How come you are here?' he said as Nihira walked past him to step inside with her luggage.

'Well, the bigger surprise is that my Bengaluru stint is finally over. I just wrapped up everything there. My stuff will be delivered in a day or two.'

Nihira hugged Garv and was about to kiss him when she heard a woman's voice.

'Sir, I think it would be good if we continue the meeting tomorrow in office.' It was Anika.

Nihira pulled away and looked at Anika first and then at Garv, waiting to be introduced.

'Sorry, my bad. This is Anika. And this is my wife, Nihira.'

'Nice to meet you, Anika,' Nihira said and, turning to Garv, added, 'I think this is the first time someone from your office has come to our place.'

'Yeah.' This was Garv's most embarrassing moment ever.

'Did you ask her if she will have dinner with us or something?' Nihira asked Garv.

'Thanks for asking, but my husband is waiting for me,' Anika said. The last part was her attempt to negate any bad vibes.

'Aww, that's nice,' Nihira said.

Anika took her leave. She took the elevator, came down and almost ran to the parking lot.

She quickly got in her car and leaned back, closing her eyes tight. She'd heard Nihira's voice from the balcony. It was clear from Garv's reaction

that he wasn't expecting his wife. She knew if Nihira had seen them drinking together, it would have caused unnecessary problems between them. She had seen it happening in her own marriage. She had quickly emptied the whiskey glasses into the plants in the balcony, put them in her bag and stubbed out the cigarettes in the ashtray before walking out.

As she opened her eyes, tears rolled down her cheeks but she decided not to wipe them.

She cursed herself for trying to share the most intimate, the most private part of her life with Garv. Perhaps she shouldn't have. Anika took a deep breath and was about to fire up the ignition when her phone rang. It was an unknown number.

She cleared her choked throat and answered.

'This is Vansh.' Anika heard him say.

'Hey, Vansh.'

'Can we talk for two minutes?'

'Yeah, sure. Tell me.'

'I kept thinking about anything and everything after I met you. I just want to help in some

way. If Yahvi was killed, I really want that bastard who killed her behind bars.'

'I appreciate that.'

'I stumbled upon something that I thought I should share with you.'

'Tell me.'

'I used to make short videos of Yahvi on my phone. Just like that. I used to watch them when she wasn't with me.'

Anika wasn't interested in the details.

'Fun videos, you know, but I can't share them as they are personal. Something between her and me. In one of the videos, she is talking about a woman on whom she had a crush. She says she tried but the woman never reciprocated. Back then I thought she was kidding but now I think she was serious. The woman's name is Nihira.

I'm a pretty liberal guy. I think it's cool to be sexually fluid. But I wasn't sure if you knew your sister was bi-curious, so I thought of sharing ... '

Vansh carried on for a good one minute and then stopped. Anika didn't respond immediately.

'Hello, you there?'

'Yeah, very much,' Anika said, getting a bad feeling about it all.

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PRESENT

The next morning, Garv ran into Anika in the elevator itself. Neither spoke much. The embarrassment was mutual. She'd told Garv the most

guarded secret of her life and yet he didn't know what it was exactly. Garv was in a dilemma.

Should he apologize or ask her what it was that he saw when she stripped? If she wasn't willing to share, she wouldn't have stripped. Meanwhile, Anika was thinking she should let him know about Vansh's call at least. But people kept coming in and going out of the elevator, leaving little room for a conversation. Their eyes met a couple of times but they could only exchange awkward

smiles.

Later, Anika was checking with Garv's PA about his schedule so she didn't upset his routine, when she received a message from him.

Could you please come into my cabin?

Instead of replying, she simply walked over to him. She found him pacing the room. As she entered and took a seat, he too took his.

'I don't know if a sorry would suffice but I'm nevertheless sorry,' he said. His pitch was low.

Anika understood she should get the personal thing sorted first before mentioning Vansh's call.

'You don't have to be sorry. But I want to clarify that I wasn't trying to sleep with you.'

Maybe it was on my mind initially but ... 1 Anika couldn't control herself as her voice choked. She quickly took out tissue paper from a box kept on the desk and dabbed her eyes.

'I don't know what happened yesterday. I respect you. Especially for the way you have gone out of your way to help me. And if you want to share anything, let me tell you I'm all ears,' Garv

said, pushing a glass of water towards her.

Anika took a sip and, keeping the glass on the table, said, 'My husband divorced me after I was diagnosed with breast cancer three years back.

I had to undergo a mastectomy but there were complications, hence the reconstruction of my breasts was postponed. Remember I told you I met Sukesh's wife at a clinic where she had gone for implants? I go there for my check-ups. The doctor has assured me that things will be all right. There's hope. That's what he feels. And I'm a cancer survivor.'

There was silence. Garv didn't know if he should say something. He felt relieved when he heard Anika continue.

'My husband remarried within six months of our divorce. I used to be bitter about it before.

But not any more. Everyone has the right to choose how they spend their life. And that choice may not always be in sync with what you want. I have always felt my beauty is a curse because people don't see beyond it. This feeling

has become stronger since my divorce. They don't see my scars. They don't see me. I hate my beauty. It's like that light which blinds people from seeing the darkness. When I met you, I didn't see lust in your eyes. That was a welcome change. There was this visceral attraction I felt for you. I wanted to be involved with you. Not in a sexual way. I wanted to have a relationship with you where I could experience real love, care and respect. I knew you were married. But I also knew you were in a long-distance marriage.

These things can't be hidden even if you don't talk about them. I thought if I gave you signals, you would take the first step. I thought sex could be an icebreaker for what I was seeking emotionally with you. I'm sorry for that. I know you understood those signals and yet remained quiet. While I kept pursuing you like a moron.

Trust me, I've never done that in my life. But guess what, helping you in your quest gave me something to hold on to. Drinking together, shopping, cooking for you ... in my own way, I

thought I was still worthy of someone. The divorce had really made me question that. Doesn't matter what people say, hope alone isn't enough.

We all need some physical manifestation of hope as well. You are that manifestation for me.'

Garv was too taken aback to react.

'While I was married, I gave it my all. I thought my husband would be there with me in my fight against cancer. But the way he left me was more painful than the cancer itself. I ...

' Anika couldn't go on. 'Please excuse me.' She stood up and left. He saw her, through the glass walls, go inside the washroom. Garv compared her story to his own. *Anika's husband had left her just like that. The way he was ready to leave Nihira.* He could see his own reflection in the glass tabletop. He averted his eyes and turned his chair towards the window. *We are born selfish*, Garv thought, *but if love doesn't make one selfless, then nothing on earth will.* He suddenly felt he had degraded his love for Nihira by saying yes to Yahvi. When two people are in love, the

consequences of one's choices fall on the other.

For a moment, Garv felt like he couldn't think clearly. But right then the PA came in, breaking his reverie, to tell him about his upcoming meetings for the day. He had to carry on with the day. He did. During lunch, he messaged Anika: *Thanks for removing the Scotch glasses last night.*

And handling the situation. Indebted.

Anika read it, but she didn't respond.

It was only when he was getting into his car in the evening after work that Anika approached him.

'Please forget what I told you in the morning.

Let's go back to how we were before that confession?

That is just the kind of pure hope I am seeking. I anyway don't want anyone's sympathy.'

'Sure, Anika. We will do that.'

'Also, I need to tell you something. Vansh called me last night after I left your flat.'

'I'm not interested in his or Yahvi's story with other men any more. I don't think it's going to get us anywhere.'

'Yahvi had a crush on Nihira,' Anika blurted out.

Garv was flabbergasted. Anika took a minute to tell him whatever Vansh had told her.

'Thanks for the information,' Garv said.

And drove off. But after just a few minutes, he parked his car by the side of the road and opened Yahvi's Instagram profile. He then started going through the posts frantically. Finally, he came across one in which Yahvi was standing on a paved road, posing with a Starbucks coffee cup in her hand. The location tag read: Bengaluru.

How could he have missed this? Garv had never felt this helpless before. He got out of his car and screamed his guts out. He just wanted to let go of his pain, his frustration, his dilemma. A couple of minutes later, a passer-by

approached him, asking if everything was all right. Garv stopped screaming, got back in his car and drove off hastily.

When he reached home, he didn't know what to ask Nihira. Should he apologize for cheating

on her or inquire about her relationship with the woman he had cheated on her with? He rang the doorbell. A few seconds later, he got a message from her to use the spare keys. Garv let himself in. He noticed the air was filled with his favourite fragrance. He looked around. Amber and vanilla-scented candles adorned every corner of the living room. Nihira appeared from the kitchen, a glass of wine in hand, wearing a transparent red kimono. She finished her drink, kept the glass on the dining table and came to him.

She took his bag from his hand and kept it on the floor, and then placed her hand on his groin.

'I've missed you, Garv,' she whispered in his ear and then started massaging his penis through his clothes. Garv knew if he spoke about Yahvi now, Nihira would get suspicious. So, he just played along. After an hour of lovemaking, when they finally collapsed on each other, Nihira said, catching her breath, 'Fuck, I have missed this. I'm glad I moved back.'

'I'm glad too,' Garv said, kissing her forehead.

He got up and went to the washroom. By the time he came out, Nihira had served dinner.

'Is something bothering you?' Nihira asked when Garv went to the kitchen to keep his plate in the sink after dinner. He washed his hands and wiped them on the towel, then turned to her and asked, 'Remember Yahvi?' He simply put it out there without beating around the bush.

'Yahvi?' Nihira sounded surprised.

'The woman who lived in our colony.'

'The one who died a few months ago?'

'Yes. She was living here with her lover.'

'Lover? I thought that was her husband. Who told you this?' Nihira said as she went to the living room. Garv followed her.

'Someone in the colony office.' Garv was observing her carefully for any sign in her body language that would suggest she knew Yahvi from before.

'That's weird.' Nihira sat on her Bombay Fornicator chair.

'Why?' Garv asked as he drank some water

and then sat on the couch, switching on the television. *Everything should seem normal*, he thought and lowered the volume.

'She'd told me she lived here with her husband,'

Nihira said, sounding lost in thought.

'You knew her personally?' Garv asked, still looking at the television.

'Not personally. But she had come to my NGO.

In fact, a colleague brought her there.'

'To your NGO?' Garv asked and turned to look at her.

'She was suffering from S&LA. So the colleague got her to our resident psychologist.'

'What's S&LA?' Garv asked.

'It stands for sex and love addiction. Umm, how do I explain it to you in simple terms? Let me try. Basically, it's a behavioural addiction where those who suffer from it constantly crave and seek attention from different relationships.

They generally have multiple partners at any given point of time and seem to be in love with everyone. They think their own emotional wellbeing

depends on how those they are in a relationship with treat them. They tend to make an idealistic relationship in their head with someone and be in it for emotional or sexual solace. I can go on and on. But in short that's what S&LA is. You can always google it if it interests you.'

Garv nodded and turned towards the television again. Everything Nihira said matched with whatever he had unearthed about Yahvi. *She was an S&LA addict.* Garv felt empty within. So he had been just another person from whom she wanted attention?

'But what about those people with whom such a person falls in love?' Garv found himself asking Nihira. *What about him? He, who loved Yahvi truly?*

'Lots of turmoil, for sure. Mute the television, please. Let me put on some music.'

Garv did so, while Nihira connected her phone to the Bluetooth speakers and put on a Bob Marley song ... *You may not be her first, her last, or her only. She loved before, she may love again. But*

if she loves you now, what else matters?

Garv heard Nihira speak up with a grin.

'Yahvi was surely crazy. She once told me she had a crush on me. Like a serious crush. And she wanted to sleep with me.'

Garv didn't react as the song played on.

Nothing about Yahvi surprised him any more.

When they had met at the Bengaluru airport, he had thought it was the beginning of a story for both of them. But now he knew it was only her story. He was just a pawn, not a protagonist.

Like Sukesh, Rohit, Vansh and God knows who else and how many.

'I'm feeling sleepy,' Garv said and went into the bedroom after switching off the television.

He had never felt so embarrassed. He tried to open Yahvi's Instagram profile, but wasn't able to find it. *Deleted? Deactivated by the husband?*

Garv couldn't care less. There were still so many unanswered questions. But Garv was done being lost in the labyrinth of lies Yahvi had created.

From what Nihira had told him, it was clear she

had kept everyone away from her reality. Each of the men, including him, knew only what Yahvi wanted them to know. And not the truth. How do you break one huge lie into different pieces of truth with the one who created the lie in the first place dead? Garv didn't bother to find out why Yahvi's profile wasn't visible to him any more. He deleted the app from his phone and called it a night.

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Two days later, he noticed that Anika was back in office. She had taken a few days off. She came into his cabin for some official work. Once it was done, Garv asked, 'I hope everything's fine with you? Let me know if you need any help.'

'I sure will. Thank you so much for asking.

The surgeon told me I'm responding well to the treatment.'

'That's good to know, Anika. Please email all your medical bills to HR. It will be sponsored by the office.'

'It's not ... ' Anika stopped after looking at

Garv's expression.

'Please let me do this. It's not out of pity, I promise,' Garv said earnestly.

'Thank you,' she said it with a smile. Garv smiled back.

'Also,' she said, 'Vansh has been calling me.'

'Please block him. If he still tries to get in touch, let me know. I shall take care of it.'

Anika understood Garv was done with Yahvi.

Her mind was working fast. Was it a good time to confess the truth she had kept from him since she met Yahvi's husband, Swagat?

'What else?' Garv asked, sensing she was still there even though their meeting was over.

'I've a confession to make. I know you may hate me for this but I hope you won't.'

'What is it?'

'When I met Swagat for the first time, he told me something which I didn't tell you. For my own selfish reasons.'

'What is it?' Garv repeated again. It was clear he was getting impatient.

'Swagat told me that Yahvi was alive and in the US with their kid. He told me about his plan to shift. He had caught Yahvi with a man.

He didn't tell me who the man was. Swagat knew she was having an extramarital affair and packed her up from here.'

'Yahvi has a kid?' Garv asked. He felt bereft of any emotion.

'Yeah.' Anika's voice was soft.

There was a deafening silence in the cabin.

'I'm so sorry,' Anika said, breaking it. 'That is why there wasn't any police report of the accident and ... I did this so you didn't reach out to her and I could ... '

Garv raised his hand to silence her.

'This meeting is over,' he said with a tight smile. Anika stood up and slowly walked out of his cabin, her face crestfallen. Garv immediately buzzed his PA on the intercom and asked her to move up all his meetings for the day with no interval in between.

Nihira had booked a dinner date for them at a

restaurant in Hotel Comad that night. It was a surprise about which Garv came to know only in the evening. He wasn't in the mood but he still obliged. *What is Nihira's fault in this? I am a fool.*

I allowed Yahvi to make a fool of me, he thought as he drove to the hotel.

Coincidentally, they sat at the same table where Yahvi and he used to sit whenever they met there for lunch. As the food was being served, she grasped his hand and whispered, 'My motherly instinct is calling out loud and clear now. Let's be parents.'

Garv gave her a forced smile and nodded.

A few quiet seconds later, Garv said, 'Nihira, I need to confess something to you.'

Nihira seemed to be all ears.

PART II: NIHIRA

PRESENT

They say it's important to put every story in context otherwise nobody gets a sense of what's happening and why. The why is especially important. I've thought enough about what I should call this story, so I can give it the right context. And then I arrived at a conclusion. This is the story of my marriage. Though marriage happens between two people, and, ideally, I should say this is the story of *our* marriage, but that won't be correct. So, this is the story of *my* marriage. After two and a half years, I'm finally done with my stint at the NGO. And I'm returning to Pune. To Garv. To home. But before

that, I need to visit my psychologist, Dr Sharan Pandita, one last time. I've been his patient from some time now. Nothing is wrong with me. But after what I learnt two years ago about my marriage, I needed someone to talk to. Someone who would not demand anything in return. Someone I could pay to listen. Thus, I chose Dr Sharan Pandita, who used to be a visiting doctor at our NGO. Let me proceed linearly for it to make better sense.

Garv and I had our doubts when we decided to stay apart. But our love, our trust in each other, played a big role in the decision-making process. In the beginning, I used to fly to Pune every weekend. Then, because of work pressure, it reduced to twice a month and then became once a month; either he would fly to Bengaluru or I went to Pune. Something happened in the fifth month, I remember clearly, after we started living apart. He had flown to Bengaluru for the weekend. While he was in the shower, his phone beeped. He had got a new notification. Simply

out of curiosity, I tried to unlock his phone, but realized he had changed his lock pattern. This had never happened before. We always knew each other's passwords. Not out of mistrust.

That's the way it was from the beginning and neither of us had questioned it. I kept an eye on him and by night I knew what the new pattern was. Once he was asleep I checked his phone, and it didn't take me long to find a couple of dating apps. I spent the entire night reading his chats on the apps. Surprisingly, he wasn't on social media. He had a Face book account but never used it. I now know why he didn't, the same reason why he never enjoyed movies, but I'll come to that later. As I said, let's go linearly.

I was heartbroken because all the chats were with women, and were sex chats, full of explicit language and sexual content. I didn't know Garv had this side to him even though we had been together for so long. Perhaps we had become like those books we bought intending to read, but they remained on our bookshelves for years. We

took our own sweet time to read them. Sometimes we never did. Garv and I had become such books for each other.

It was clear from the chats that he had even met a few of them. He'd cheated on me, though it was impossible to tell if he had slept with any of the women. You know how dangerous such information can be for the mind. It starts churning out bad thoughts and images that haunt you. I wanted to kill him that night for destroying my trust. I had been proud of us till then. Proud of our marriage. But the chats were proof of the fact that he had made a mockery of it. Why? Because I was not physically present in Pune? He could have told me. I would have resigned from the NGO to be with him. Or was this an opportunity for him to fulfil his sexual fantasies, knowing well that I would never come to know about it? Was my marriage, an institution to which I had given days, weeks, months and years of my life, over? Was it over just like that because sexting women on dating apps

was more liberating? I simply couldn't come to terms with it. I knew if I confronted him my rage wouldn't let me hear him out. And I wanted to give him a chance. My love for him wanted to give him a chance. So, in the dead of the night, I went and sat on a bench in the colony park to clear my mind. In the morning, I saw a few missed calls from him. I didn't care to respond.

Then I saw him coming down from the building and running helter-skelter, asking the guards if they had seen me. He looked worried. It seemed like he cared. Then why was he sexting and meeting women? I swear I felt like burning all those women to ashes. I have a history of being jealous, possessive of my things, but why not?

When they are mine, they are mine. If someone tries to toy with them, they better have my permission or be ready for the consequences.

Anyway, Garv was going berserk looking for me, so I decided to go to him. I thought we would go back to my flat, where I would demand an explanation for why he was disturbing what

we had created together. But guess what? He didn't recognize me. He simply walked past me and continued to call my name. He tried my number again. It was only when he heard my phone ring that he turned and, a moment later, realized it was me standing beside him, and asked where I was. I was shocked. Did he not notice me? Highly unlikely, as I was right there.

There was nobody around. I didn't confront him or ask him anything. This incident overshadowed everything else. It stayed with me as I'd come across a similar case a few years ago in the NGO but I was praying this wasn't the same. I didn't confront him about the chats, acted all normal, and that evening, when we went to a nightclub, I intentionally took another set of clothes. After securing a table, I excused myself to go to the washroom, where I changed my clothes and my hairstyle and came out and sat at a table right opposite him. He was sipping his drink, looking around. He even looked at me a few times. No reaction. I was right. I went inside,

changed back and came out. As I took a seat next to him, he recognized me once again.

Once Garv flew back to Pune, I started talking to doctors in Bengaluru. One of them gave me a few tests which could be done at home to confirm the case. When I flew to Pune the following weekend, I casually made him undergo the tests.

Obviously, I didn't tell him what they were. I projected them as fun games. One of them was to show him photographs of a person and then slip in photographs of the same person but with a different look. He couldn't recognize them. He failed not only in this one but every test I made him take.

I went back to Bengaluru. I didn't know what to do. Should I confront my husband because he had been cheating on me or should I treat him first for his prosopagnosia? That's what he was suffering from. In layman's terms, it was 'face blindness', a kind of neurological disorder. It's a rare one, and many times people go through their lives without even realizing they have

it. They generally blame it on memory if they can't recall a face. People with this condition are unable to recognize faces, be it real people or moving images or photographs. They rely on physical attributes and recognize people by their behavioural pattern, voice, gait or manner of dressing, etc. You change the attributes and they won't recognize you. That morning in Bengaluru, he didn't recognize me because I had unknowingly tied my hair in a different way. In the nightclub, I changed my clothes and hairdo and that's why he didn't recognize me. I don't exactly know when he

developed it or why. Perhaps it was always there, because even in college, when we were dating, he couldn't identify people in photographs and he didn't have a sense of the characters when we went for movies. Maybe it accentuated with time. I don't know for sure.

Though thinking back, there were times when he couldn't recognize some of my old friends and his colleagues when we ran into them. Maybe this was one of the reasons he was not on social

media. I noticed it only that morning because something like this had never happened before.

This was the first time he had not recognized me when I was right in front of him.

Once I came back to Bengaluru, my heart and mind were waging an emotional battle. I started smoking because of this but Garv never came to know. My heart, which loved him, wanted to tell him about his condition and support him as a wife, while my mind wanted revenge. If he could cheat, why couldn't I? I too was lonely living alone in Bengaluru, and craved attention.

There were so many men ready to take me to bed. I could see it in their eyes. Men my age, boys and even older men. But I was careful. Not because I was a prude. I chose not to do anything.

I respected what we had and didn't want momentary loneliness to ruin it. So why couldn't he choose not to? Wasn't my love strong enough to make him feel guilty for crossing the line? I was trying to find a balance between my heart and mind when I came across Yahvi Goel. And I

knew how to fix my marriage.

It was Dr Sharan who introduced me to her at our NGO office. The more I spoke to her as a counsellor, the more she fascinated me. Her story, I mean. She was suffering from sex and love addiction. It wasn't just the multiple partners.

What amazed me was that she convinced herself that she was in love with every man she met. It was like she made her own reality with everyone, but didn't tell them her reality, where she lived, what she did or who she really was.

No, she wasn't a con woman. She was a prisoner of her own compulsive desires. None of the men she was in love with knew she worked for a leading ad agency as a food stylist in Mumbai.

Her husband, Swagat Goel, was Pune-based and hence she used to divide her time between Pune and Mumbai. She did tell me she had a crush on me¹ but I told her I was straight and, with my marriage on the verge of breaking up, I was looking at different things in life. Yahvi's story stayed with me even after our sessions were over. I

knew she was having an affair with Dr Sharan as well but it was their personal thing which I wasn't interested in.

I was interested in my own husband: Garv.

I understood it was easy to call it quits. It was easy to confront him about the sex chats and any possible dalliances, and ask for a divorce.

Then what? Would I be able to live with the scar this relationship would give me? I finally decided to repair my marriage. And told myself that I would do it my way. Call me twisted or highly Machiavellian, but tell you what, a wife is a force of nature. No man should challenge her.

I had a plan. I got a total makeover-from my hairdo to my skin tone to my physique. I joined a gym to lose that extra flab and also went for voice modulation lessons. In three months, I could change the pitch of my voice to my liking.

And then I met Garv as Yahvi Kothari at the Bengaluru airport. I changed my physical attributes when in front of him and prosopagnosia made him fall for it. For example, I pretended

to be a lefty as I knew he would pick up on it to recognize me as Yahvi. When I injured myself accidentally,

I told Garv I had been abused by my

husband. When I couldn't fly to Pune from Bengaluru, I cancelled our meetings, saying 'Yahvi'

had problems at home with her husband. When I had to attend the office seminar in Ooty, 'Yahvi'

had to go to the US.

I used to be alert and nervous when I met him as Yahvi. I would be cautious about my voice and body language so that he didn't get suspicious.

And even if he did, he had more to lose than me, because he was the one deceiving me. I was still making it work in my own way.

Garv's condition actually made him believe I was a different woman whom he had just met at an airport and who wanted to meet him again. I used the real Yahvi's story and made it mine. The real Yahvi indeed had a love nest with Sukesh in DFL Enclave. She was actually blackmailed by Rohit after they hooked up in the gym. Vansh and she were dating for the longest time till her

husband caught her. I know all this because of our sessions at the NGO. I shall come to that. As I said, let's go linearly. The one thing that worked for me was that Garv had never met the real Yahvi. Hence, there was no scope of comparison.

The only 'Yahvi' he knew was me.

As Garv and I started meeting, I discovered weird truths about relationships. For starters, I realized when someone is on your mind, you don't notice the person who is right there beside you. When Garv started meeting me as Yahvi, he stopped noticing me as Nihira. You know how

sometimes we stare at something but are actually not looking at it because we are lost in thought? I was that thing and 'Yahvi' was the thought.

I also realized that sometimes all we need to do is add a bit of unpredictability in our own relationships and things run fine because with time we try to frame each other in our own definitions. It's important to pleasantly surprise your partner from time to time so that they feel

there is more to you than meets the eye; that there are still things they haven't uncovered yet.

For whether it's places or people, if you think you have seen it all, even love can't make you stay interested. Then you just drag the relationship on because you are used to the person.

I remember I cried myself to sleep the day we had sex in my (rented) car, which he thought belonged to Yahvi, and he professed his love shortly afterwards. Though he was technically not cheating, I realized how easy it was to seduce someone even though he was in a committed relationship.

But then I was also happy when Garv told me (as Yahvi) that he wasn't in it for sex. I understood there was still love between us, but we needed to rediscover the lust. Weird, no? Lust isn't always a bad thing. It makes you respect the body, the way love makes you respect the soul. When Garv and I made love in Hotel Conrad, like animals, it served as strong validation.

Though we were the same people, we had never

made such wild love before. The fact that he found that spark in me again gave me hope.

I knew I could save our marriage. But was I playing 'Yahvi' just to save my marriage? No!

Being Yahvi, I wanted to scar him for life so that he never had an extramarital affair again. He should learn his lesson once and for all, that ex

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tramarital affairs are a sheer waste of time.

The plan to leave him, disappear from his life, was always there. But for that, I needed to lead him into something that gave him hope.

Hence, I proposed the elopement. It broke my heart when he agreed. He was ready to leave his wife for a woman he had met at an airport and come to know only through irregular meetings and phone conversations. I don't know what has happened to men? Have they become this gullible or were they always like this? It made me believe in my plan even more. I had to scar him. And I did. First, by meeting him at the dhaba on the day of our supposed elopement and then vanishing from his life altogether,

making him feel like a fool. I removed all traces so that he couldn't reach the Yahvi he knew.

That's one of the reasons 'Yahvi' didn't propose divorce, because I would have been exposed.

That's why 'she' asked him to book his own ticket and apply for a visa separately. Having worked with different kinds of people over the years at the NGO, I knew this betrayal would enrage Garv.

I thought my work was done. Especially when I visited him that very weekend and we made love. It had the same passion which I had experienced with him as Yahvi. I thought my plan

had worked. I began to wrap up my work in Bengaluru. I even told Dr Sharan, with whom I would discuss this matter. But two nights ago, when I landed at the house without telling him, after wrapping up my Bengaluru stint, I was shocked to see that he was not alone. He was with his employee, Anika, and I wondered if I hadn't scarred him enough. They tried their best to pretend it was a work meeting, but I could

smell the alcohol on Garv's breath. And I knew he never worked under the influence. Was he still a wanderer?

I got Anika's number from his office. I met her the next day, told her my part of the story, and thankfully learnt that there was nothing between them. I was so relieved. What I wasn't ready for was Garv's investigation of the real Yahvi's death on the basis of her Instagram posts. I had no clue what Garv and Anika were up to till then. I was a little worried when Garv recognized Sukesh while we were out for brunch, but I thought, how far could he go with that? His face blindness (I must say I simply got lucky) didn't let him recognize the real Yahvi in her Instagram posts, else he would have known this wasn't the woman he had met.

After Anika told me how they had investigated the matter, thinking Yahvi was dead, and then later found out she wasn't, I understood Garv had finally given up on her. I myself had a talk with Dr Sharan, one of Yahvi's paramours,

matched his version with what Anika had told me, and understood that Garv and Anika had reached the right conclusion. Swagat had caught Yahvi red-handed and packed her off to the US.

By the way, the guy with the long hair, with whom Garv had seen me (as Yahvi) in the food court, was Dr Sharan. I improvised and told Garv that he was my husband. I think the fact that he had long hair and the way he brushed it with his hands stayed with Garv.

The false news of Yahvi's death was spread by Sukesh after he found out that her husband knew what she had been up to. He didn't want to get into trouble and hence severed ties with her. And here I am, back with my husband. Back in my marriage. I hope I have scared my husband enough to not look beyond me for any of his needs: physical, emotional, psychological or even sexual.

To be honest, I won't blame him for everything.

It wasn't always like this. Our marriage was just sailing and we both were okay with

that. But simply 'sailing' isn't enough to sustain a marriage or any relationship. One has to constantly look up to see the direction in which it's

going, steer it a bit, make sure newer lands are discovered, newer storms are encountered and newer weather is experienced together. For, a relationship is never the destination. It's always the journey.

Dr Sharan finished reading Nihira's handwritten account and looked up, flashing a wistful smile.

They were in his Pune clinic.

'It's absolutely fine,' he said, brushing away his long hair and keeping the file aside. He had requested Nihira to write about her experience so that his students could refer to it later as a case study.

'My assistant will strike off the names and certain details which may not be necessary for an academic research,' he said.

'Works for me,' Nihira said.

'I miss Yahvi,' Dr Sharan said, opening the window and lighting a cigarette. Nihira resisted her urge to ask for one.

'I don't,' Nihira said with a sly smile. They both laughed and then Dr Sharan gave her the card of a doctor in Delhi who could treat Garv's face blindness to an extent.

'Thank you so much for everything,' she said.

'Happy married life, Nihira. Not everyone's as lucky as you.'

'Not everyone's as hard-working and obsessive about their marriage as me, I guess,' she said and took her leave.

Epilogue

The Beginning of an

Old Romance

PRESENT

Garv looked up at Nihira after he was done with his confession. Her eyes were moist. They were still in the restaurant at Hotel Conrad. He'd told her everything. All the details of his 'detour'

with 'Yahvi'. They were still holding hands.

'I know it's my fault,' Garv said, 'and I will respect whatever you decide now, but if possible please stay.' The words choked him. Nihira didn't speak. She withdrew her hand and took a sip of her wine. Garv understood she wasn't in the mood to eat any more. Nor was he. He called for the bill, paid it and they left.

They drove quietly, till Nihira asked him to stop the car on a deserted road. They were inside Pune University. There was nobody around. She reclined her seat and lay back, looking at the moon through the sunroof. Garv followed suit.

'The moon is beautiful tonight, isn't it?' she asked. Her voice was almost a whisper.

Garv nodded.

'Do you think the moon looks this beautiful every night?'

'No.1

'And when it doesn't, do the stars give up on the moon?' she asked.

Garv understood what she was hinting at.

He grasped her hand; she felt his body shudder.

It was obvious he was crying. He knew he had been forgiven and he wouldn't be losing the only thing that mattered in his life.

'I'm sorry, Nihira. I really am. You know, when I was depressed after some of my entrepreneurial ventures flopped, you showed faith in me. I was completely lost then. I didn't know if I had it in me any more. But you gave me strength.'

There was silence.

'Marriage is often misunderstood as the destination.

It's a long, long walk, Garv. And all we can do is hold on to each other's vices as long as they don't challenge our virtues.'

'I agree.'

'Sometimes it's better to be a relationship after knowing it may not be there forever, for it makes you respect and care for it more,' she said.

Garv took her hand and kissed it. She felt his warm tears on her hand but didn't react.

I crossed your heart, husband, now it's time for you to take my name. Only your wife's name, forever, Nihira thought and smiled.

;-.....)

Acknowledgements

This book will always be special to me because it happened and came through during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been an emotionally consuming experience for various reasons.

I'm glad I could still knit the story together and share it with my lovely readers who have always showered me and my stories with love.

Hope the love continues.

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THE BEGINNING

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