‘What do you mean, not enough rooms?’ I said to Arijit Banerjee, the lobby manager of the Goa Marriott.

‘See, what I am trying to explain is. . .’ Arijit began in his modulated, courteous voice when mom cut him off.

‘It’s my daughter’s wedding. Are you going to shame us?’ she said, her volume loud enough to startle the rest of the reception staff.

‘No, ma’am. Just a shortage of twenty rooms. You booked a hundred. We had only promised eighty then. We hoped to give more but the chief minister had a function and. . .’

‘What do we tell our guests who have come all the way from America?’ mom said. ‘If I may suggest, there is another hotel two kilometres away,’ Arijit said.

‘We *have* to be together. You are going to ruin my daughter’s wedding for some sarkaari function?’ my mother said, bosom heaving, breath heavy—classic warning signs of an upcoming storm.

‘Mom, go sit with dad, please. I will sort this out,’ I said. Mom glared at me. How could I, the bride, do all this in the first place? I should be worried about my facials, not room allocations.

‘The boy’s side arrives in less than three hours. I can’t believe this,’ she muttered, walking to the sofa at the centre of the lobby. My father sat there along with Kamla bua, his elder sister. Other uncles and aunts occupied the remaining couches in the lobby—a Mehta takeover of the Marriott. My mother looked at my father, a level-two glare. It signified: ‘Will you ever take the initiative?’

My father shifted in his seat. I refocused on the lobby manager. ‘What can be done now, Arijit?’ I said. ‘My entire family is here.’

We had come on the morning flight from Delhi. The Gulatis, the boy’s side, would take off from Mumbai at 3 p.m. and land in Goa at 4. Twenty hired Innovas would bring them to the hotel by 5. I checked the time—2.30 p.m.

‘See, ma’am, we have set up a special desk for the Mehta–Gulati wedding,’ Arijit said. ‘We are doing the check-ins for your family now.’

He pointed to a makeshift counter at the far corner of the lobby where three female Marriott employees with permanent smiles sat. They welcomed everyone with folded hands. Each guest received a shell necklace, a set of key cards for the room, a map of the Marriott Goa property and a ‘wedding information booklet’. The booklet contained the entire programme for the week, including the time, venue and other details of the ceremonies.

‘My side will take fifty rooms. The Gulatis need fifty too,’ I said.

‘If you take fifty, ma’am, we will only have thirty left for them,’ Arijit said.

‘Where is Suraj?’ I said. Suraj was the owner of Moonshine Events, the event manager we had appointed for the wedding. ‘We will manage last minute’ is what he had told me.

‘At the airport,’ Arijit said.

My father ambled up to the reception desk. ‘Everything okay, beta?’ I explained the situation to him.

‘Thirty rooms! The Gulatis have 120 guests,’ my father said. ‘Exactly.’ I threw up my hands.

Mom and Kamla bua came to the reception as well. ‘I told Sudarshan also, why all this Goa business? Delhi has so many nice banquet halls and farmhouses. Seems like you have money to waste,’ Kamla bua said.

I wanted to retort but my mother gave me the Mother Look. *They are our guests*, I reminded myself. I let out a huge breath. ‘How many from our side?’ my mother said.

‘Mehta family has 117 guests, ma’am,’ Arijit said, counting from his reservation sheets.

‘If we only have eighty, that is forty rooms for each side,’ I said. ‘Let’s reallocate. Stop the check-ins for the Mehtas right now.’

Arijit signalled the smiling ladies at the counter. They stopped the smiles and the check-ins and put the shell necklaces back in the drawer.

‘How can we reduce the rooms for the boy’s side?’ my mother said in a shocked voice. ‘What else to do?’ I said.

‘How many rooms are they expecting?’ she said.

‘Fifty,’ I said. ‘Call them now. They will readjust their allocations on the way here.’ ‘How can you ask the boy’s side to adjust?’ Kamla bua said. ‘Aparna, are you serious?’ My mother looked at Kamla bua and me.

‘But how can we manage in only thirty rooms?’ I said and turned to my father. ‘Dad, call

them.’

‘Sudarshan, don’t insult them before they even arrive,’ Kamla bua said. ‘We will manage in

thirty rooms. It’s okay. Some of us will sleep on the floor.’

‘Nobody needs to sleep on the floor, bua,’ I said. ‘I am sorry this screw-up happened. But if we have forty rooms each, it is three to a room. With so many kids anyway, it should be fine.’

‘We can manage in thirty,’ my mother said.

‘Mom? That’s four to a room. While the Gulatis will have so much space. Let’s tell them.’ ‘No,’ my mother said. ‘We can’t do that.’

‘Why?’

‘They are the boy’s side. Little bit also you don’t understand?’

I didn’t want to lose it at my own wedding, definitely not in the first hour of arrival. I turned to my father. ‘Dad, it’s no big deal. His family will understand. We are here for six nights. It will get too tight for us,’ I said.

Dad, of course, would not listen. These two women, his wife and sister, controlled his remote.

For once, both of them were on the same page as well.

‘Beta, these are norms. You don’t understand. We have to keep them comfortable. Girl’s side is expected to adjust,’ he said.

I argued for five more minutes. It didn’t work. I had to relent. And do what the girl’s side needs to do—adjust.

‘You and Aditi take a room,’ my mother said, referring to my sister.

‘Let her be with her husband. What will jiju think?’ I said. ‘Anil will adjust with the other gents,’ Kamla bua said.

Over the next twenty minutes the two women sorted the extended Mehta family comprising 117 people into thirty rooms. They used a complex algorithm with criteria like the people sharing the room should not hate each other (warring relatives were put in different rooms) or be potentially attracted to each other (mixed gender rooms were avoided, even if it involved people aged eighty- plus). Kids were packed five to a room, often with a grandparent. Kamla bua, herself a widow, dramatically offered to sleep on the floor in my parents’ room, causing my father to offer his own bed and sleep on the floor instead. Of course, Arijit kept saying that they would put extra beds in the room. But how can you compare sleeping on an extra Marriott bed with the Punjabi bua’s eternal sacrifice of sleeping on the floor?

‘I am happy with roti and achaar,’ Kamla bua said. ‘It’s the Marriott. There is enough food, bua,’ I said. ‘I am just saying.’

‘Can you please focus on the reallocations? We all need to be checked in before the Gulatis arrive,’ I said.

In the middle of this chaos, I forgot what I had come here for. I had come to change my life forever. To do something I’d never believed in my whole life. To do something I never thought I would. I had come to have an arranged marriage.

Here I was, lost in logistics, guest arrangements and bua tantrums. I took a moment to reflect.

*I will be married in a week. To a guy I hardly know. This guy and I are to share a bed, home and life for the rest of my life.*

*Why isn’t it sinking in? Why am I fighting with Suraj on chat instead?*

Me: Major screw-up on rooms, Suraj. Not cool.

Suraj: Sorry. Really sorry. Political reasons. Tried. Really. Me: What else is going to get screwed up?

Suraj: Nothing. IndiGo from Mumbai just landed. We are ready to receive guests. See you

soon.

I went to the Mehta–Gulati check-in desk. All my family guests had checked in. Some did

grumble about sharing a room with three others but most seemed fine. Mom said that the grumblers were the jealous types, the relatives who couldn’t stand the fact that we had reached a level where we could do a destination wedding in Goa. The supportive ones, according to mom, were those who understood what it was like to be the girl’s side.

‘Do not use this “girl’s side” and “boy’s side” logic with me again. I don’t like it,’ I said. Mom and I were sitting in the lobby, ensuring that the staff readied the special check-in desk for the Gulatis.

‘Can you stop waving your feminism flag for a week? This is a wedding, not an NGO activist venue,’ my mother said.

‘But. . .’

‘I know you are paying for it. Still, beta, protocol is protocol.’ ‘It is a sexist protocol.’

‘Did you figure out your parlour appointments? Aditi also wants hair and make-up all six

days.’

I love how my mother can throw another topic into the conversation if she doesn’t want to

answer me.

box.’

‘Of course she does,’ I said. ‘Now go change,’ mom said. ‘What?’

‘You are going to meet the boy’s side in jeans and T-shirt? And look at your neck!’ ‘Again you said “boy’s side”. And what’s wrong with my neck?’

‘There is no jewellery. Go change into a salwar-kameez and wear a chain from my jewellery

‘I have just arrived. I am working to settle the guests in. Why am I expected to doll up? Is the

boy expected to dress up right after he gets off a flight?’

My mother folded her hands. When logic fails, she does this, brings both her hands together dramatically. Strangely, it works.

I relented and stood up. She handed me the key cards to her and my room. I went to her room first. I took out a gold necklace, the thinnest and least hideous of them all. *Why am I agreeing to this?* I wondered even as I wore it. *Maybe because I failed when I did things my way. All the women’s empowerment and feminism bullshit didn’t really take me anywhere, right? Maybe Kamla bua and mom’s way was the right way.*

I went to my room. Four huge suitcases were crammed into the walking space in the corridor. Two giant bags belonged to my sister, who had essentially packed a retail store’s worth of dresses for herself.

I opened one of my suitcases, took out a yellow silk salwar-kameez with a slim zari border. My mother had told me, no cottons this week. I undressed. I looked at myself in the mirror. My wavy hair had grown, and now reached my shoulders. I looked slim—the two-month diet before the wedding had helped. The black La Perla lingerie I had purchased in Hong Kong also gave a little lift here and a little tuck there. *Expensive underwear can make any woman look sexy*, a little voice in my head said. Some men in the past had called me sexy, but they could have been biased. *Why am I always so hard on myself? Why couldn’t they have genuinely found me sexy?* Well, it didn’t matter now. I would be undressing in front of a new man soon. The thought made me shudder.

I walked closer to the mirror. I saw my face up-close. ‘It’s all happening, Radhika,’ I said out

loud.

Hi, I am Radhika Mehta and I am getting married this week. I am twenty-seven years old. I

grew up in Delhi. I now work in London, at Goldman Sachs, an investment bank. I am a vice president in the Distressed Debt Group. Thank you for reading my story. However, let me warn you. You may not like me too much. One, I make a lot of money. Two, I have an opinion on everything. Three, I’ve had sex. Now if I was a guy you would be okay with all of this. But since I am a girl these three things don’t really make me too likeable, do they?

I am also a bit of a nerd. My sister, Aditi, and I went to school together in Delhi at Springdales, Pusa Road. She is just a year older than me. My parents wanted a son for their firstborn. When Aditi came, they had to undo the damage as soon as possible. Hence, my father, SBI Naraina Vihar Branch Manager Sudarshan Mehta, decided to have another child with his homemaker wife, Aparna Mehta. Sadly for them, the second was also a girl, which was me. It is rumoured that they tried again twice; both times my mother had an abortion because it was a girl. I confronted her on this topic years ago, but she brushed it off.

‘I don’t remember, actually,’ she said, ‘but I am happy with my two daughters.’ ‘You don’t remember two abortions?’

‘You will judge me, so no point telling you. You don’t know what it is like to be without a

son.’

I had stopped asking her after that.

In school, Aditi didi was a hundred times more popular than me. She was the girl boys had

crushes on. I was the girl who started to wear spectacles in class six. Aditi didi is fair-complexioned. I am what they call wheatish in matrimonial ads (why don’t they call white-skinned people rice-ish?). We look like the before–after pictures in a fairness cream ad; I’m the before picture, of course. Aditi didi started dieting from age twelve, and waxed her legs from age thirteen. I topped my class at age twelve, and won the Maths Olympiad at age thirteen. Clearly, she was the cooler one. In school, people either didn’t notice me or made fun of me. I preferred the former. Hence, I stayed in the background, with my books. Once, in class ten, a boy asked me out in front of the whole class. He gave me a red rose along with an Archies greeting card. Overwhelmed, I cried tears of joy. Turned out it was a prank. The entire class laughed as he squeezed the rose and ink sprayed across my face. My spectacles protected my eyes, thankfully.

That day I realized I had only one thing going for me—academics. In class twelve I was the school topper. I ranked among the top five in Delhi, which, come to think of it, was a major loser-like thing to do. Unlike me, Aditi didi had barely passed class twelve a year ago. However, she did win the unofficial title of Miss Hotness at her farewell. In some ways, oh well, in every way, that was a bigger achievement than topping CBSE.

Have you heard about the insane cut-offs at Delhi University? I am the kind of student that causes them. I scored a 98 per cent aggregate in class twelve. Then I joined Shri Ram College of Commerce, or SRCC. People say it is one of the best colleges for nerds. At SRCC, I realized that I was nerdier than even the regular nerds. I topped there too. I never bunked a class. I hardly spoke to any boys, I made few friends. With bad school memories, I wanted to survive college with as little human contact as possible.

I finished college and took the CAT for MBA entrance. As you can guess, nerdy me hit a 99.7 percentile. I made it to IIM Ahmedabad. In contrast, Aditi didi had finished her graduation from Amity University the year before and wanted to get married. She had two criteria for her groom. One, the boy had to be rich. Second, well, there was no second criterion really. She said something like she wanted to be a housewife and look after her husband. Fortunately, rich Punjabi men in Delhi who can’t woo women on their own are only too happy to oblige girls like her. Aditi didi married Anil, owner of three sanitaryware shops in Paharganj and two Honda CR-Vs. They had their wedding the same year I joined IIMA.

‘You should also get married soon,’ didi had told me. ‘There’s a right time for a girl to marry.

Don’t delay it.’

‘I am twenty-one,’ I said. ‘I haven’t even done my master’s yet.’ ‘The younger the better. Especially for someone like you,’ she said. ‘What do you mean *especially* for someone like me?’

She never explained. I guess she meant for someone as nerdy as me or as wheatish as me or someone whose breasts weren’t the size of footballs, as Punjabi men prefer.

I joined IIMA. I finally found nerd heaven. Everyone studied, and just when you thought you had studied enough, the institute gave you more assignments. My mother called on a regular basis, primarily to discuss her favourite topic. ‘Start looking at boys at least. Anil’s circle has many good, rich guys.’

‘I am not going to marry a man from the circle of sanitaryware shop owners, mom.’ ‘Why?’ my mother said, genuinely confused.

‘You know what, I am not getting married for several years anyway. Forget it. I have class now. Bye.’

I finished with IIMA. Overachiever me had a job offer on Day Zero, the prime slot for recruiters. I got an offer to be an associate at Goldman Sachs, New York. The job paid an annual compensation of 120,000 dollars.

‘Forty-eight lakh rupees a year, four lakhs a month, mom,’ I told her on the phone.

I heard nothing in response. Most likely she had fainted. My father had never crossed a third of this amount in his twenty-five-year career with the State Bank of India.

‘Are you there, mom?’

‘How will I ever find a boy for you?’ she said.

That was her prime concern. Her twenty-three-year-old daughter, who grew up in middle- class West Delhi, had cracked a job at one of the biggest investment banks in the world and all she cared about was its impact on her groom-hunt.

‘Stop it, mom. What boy?’

‘Who wants to marry a girl who earns so much? If the boy earns less, he won’t consider you. If he earns more, why would he marry a working girl?’

‘I have no idea what you are talking about. But I am moving to America. I have a great job.

Can you save your melodrama for another time?’

‘Your father wants to speak to you,’ she said and passed him the phone. ‘Goldman Sachs? American, no?’ he said.

My room phone rang, startling me back to reality. *I am in Goa, not IIMA*, I reminded myself. ‘Where are you? The Gulatis are ten minutes away,’ my mother said.

‘Huh? I am here, mom. In my room.’ ‘Are you dressed?’

I looked in the mirror. ‘Yeah, almost.’

‘Come down fast. What are you wearing?’ ‘The yellow salwar-kameez. Zari border.’ ‘Silk?’

‘Yes.’

‘You wore a chain?’ ‘Yes.’

‘Come then.’



‘Hey, remember me?’ I heard a voice behind me. I turned around. ‘Brijesh,’ I said to my husband-to-be. ‘Hi.’

I didn’t know what to do next. *Should I look shy? Should I giggle? Should I give him a hug?* Like an idiot, I shook hands with him while he adjusted his black-rimmed spectacles with his left hand. Unlike how he’d looked in the Skype calls of the past few weeks, he was thinner, his white kurta and blue jeans hanging a bit on him. His neatly combed side-parted hair made him look like those schoolboys whom teachers first ask to become prefects. I smelled strong aftershave.

I was in the lobby. The boy’s side had arrived. They crowded around the special check-in desk. The hotel staff brought in trays filled with glasses of coconut water.

‘I made them get the coconut water. It wasn’t part of the package,’ Suraj told me. He was trying hard to compensate for the rooms’ disaster. He gave me a printout of the week’s plan. I glanced at it.

Radhika weds Brijesh: Itinerary for the week Day 1: Arrival, check-ins, briefing, relax in resort

Day 2: Goa Darshan Tour for elders and children (11 a.m.-6 p.m.)

Bachelor Party for Mr Brijesh Gulati at Club Cubana (8 p.m.)

Bachelorette Party for Ms Radhika Mehta at LPK (8 p.m.)

‘You have organized buses for the bachelor parties?’ I said.

‘Yes, ma’am. The buses will be there at 7.30 at the front entrance.’ I read further.

Day 3: Bhajan and Puja in function room (4 p.m.)

Day 4: Mehndi—counters for all ladies in function room (12-6 p.m.) Day 5: Sangeet in function room (8 p.m.)

‘The choreographer is here for the sangeet practice?’ I said.

‘No, ma’am. He will arrive in two days. He said that’s enough time for practice.’ I looked at the itinerary again.

Day 6: Wedding at the Grand Ballroom and the Main Lawns (8 p.m.) Day 7: Checkouts and departures (12 noon)

Suraj handed over the other sheets with details about each function and venue. ‘Sorry about the rooms’ goof-up, madam. Everything is under control now,’ he said. Suraj had just left when Brijesh came up behind me.

‘This place is beautiful. Great idea to have a wedding in Goa,’ he said. His accent was 90 per cent Indian and 10 per cent American. From a distance I saw my parents at the Marriott entrance, greeting Brijesh’s parents and their relatives with folded hands. I focused back on Brijesh. ‘Thank you. I always wanted a destination wedding,’ I said.

Awkward silence for ten long, slow seconds. *What are we supposed to say to each other? Should I break the ice? Should I say, hey, we can officially start having sex in a week? Shut up, Radhika. Shut the fuck up.*

‘You look,’ Brijesh paused, searching for an apt word, ‘beautiful.’

*Could you do no better, Mr Groom? Stop it, Radhika*, I scolded myself. *Yeah, stop it*, *Radhika*! I have to tell you about this bad habit of mine. I have this little person, this inner mini-me who keeps chattering about every situation or person around me. Sometimes, this mini-me overwhelms me so much I have to think hard to remember what just happened.

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘Thank you, Brijesh.’

*And what sort of a name is Brijesh? Can it be more unfashionable? Radhika, you are going to marry a guy called Brijesh. You will be Mrs Brijesh Gulati. That’s terrible. Okay, stop it. Stop it, Radhika. He’s come a long way. He’s a nice guy. That’s what matters, right?*

‘Yellow looks nice on you,’ Brijesh continued.

*Actually, yellow sucks on me, what with my famous wheatish complexion. I wore this because mom wanted a sunflower in the lobby when the Gulatis arrived.*

*Okay, he is trying.*

‘Thanks,’ I said. *Say more, you stupid girl.* ‘Your kurta is also nice,’ I said. *Duh, could you be more stupid?*

‘Hello, beta.’ A man in his early fifties along with his wife came up to me. They seemed too

enthusiastic to be complete strangers. It took me a second to place them. All right, they were my in- laws. Mr Aadarsh Gulati and Mrs Sulochana Gulati. *Radhika, behave. Don’t say anything stupid. Be like mom. Be like Aditi. What would Aditi didi do? She would touch their feet. C’mon, dive, then.*

I bent down. I touched the feet of people I had only Skyped twice in my life but who now deserved my total respect. My parents had met them several times, of course. Dad told me they were nice people. *Nice people? How does anyone figure out nice people? Are there any nice people in this world?* See, my mind won’t stop chattering. Ever.

‘How was your flight, uncle?’ I said.

‘Just one hour from Mumbai. Not like Brijesh, who has come from halfway across the world,’ Aadarsh uncle said.

‘For you, of course,’ Sulochana aunty said and cupped my cheeks. She planted a big kiss on my forehead. I guess, considering this is a country where in-laws burn brides, they did seem like nice people.

More of Brijesh’s relatives swarmed around us.

‘Come, come, see the dulhan,’ one of the aunts said. The monkey was out of the cage and there was a free sighting in the lobby. A crowd gathered around me. I tried to remember as many names as possible.

‘My mother’s sisters, Rohini masi and Gunjan masi,’ Brijesh said, ‘and that’s dad’s brothers, Purohit chacha and Amit chacha.’

Bob-bob went my head as I wished them all. If I saw anyone with even a hint of white or dyed or henna-tinted hair, I went for their feet. Exactly as my mother would expect me to. Amid the introductions and obsequious respect going on, Brijesh pulled me aside.

‘Hey, is this too much for you?’ I shrugged.

‘Is there somewhere we could take a walk?’ he said.

There, he was being sweet. I had told him earlier I wanted to get to know him better, and he was making an effort.

‘Sure. Let’s go to the poolside,’ I said.

## 

alm trees along the Marriott pool swayed green in the breeze. The 5 p.m. December sun lit up the hotel’s cottages, casting gentle shadows everywhere. We went down the walking path, with

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the hotel to our left and the Arabian Sea to our right. I felt overdressed in my sunflower outfit as other hotel guests roamed around in shorts and vests.

‘So you just arrived yesterday from San Francisco?’ I said.

‘Yeah, landed last night,’ he said. ‘I wanted to maximize my leave. One week for the wedding. A couple of days after that at home in Mumbai. Then Bali for our honeymoon. Used it all up, actually.’

The word honeymoon caused a jolt in me. Mini-me woke up again.

*Honeymoon! After a dozen-odd Skype calls and meeting once over a day trip? A week in Bali with this man I am walking next to. Will we be naked? Stop it, Radhika*. *Focus on the moment.*

‘Must be tiring, flying so much,’ I said. ‘I saw you. Not tired anymore.’

I smiled. *The man is trying. Maybe I should too.*

Brijesh smiled back. He had innocent teacher’s-pet eyes. ‘How’s Facebook?’ I said.

‘I had a busy month. Just finished an enterprise project. So much work, front-end interfaces, back-end systems, underlying APIs.’

‘APIs?’

‘Application programme interface. Set of routines, protocols and tools for building software applications. How software components interact, basically.’

I nodded, having understood not a word.

‘You have no idea what I am talking about, right?’ I laughed.

‘I know. Not the most exciting job in the world,’ he said, his voice flat. ‘Come on, you work at Facebook. It’s quite cool.’

‘People think it is Facebook so there’s nothing to do. We post pictures all day or something.’ ‘I am sure it is pretty high-tech behind the scenes.’

*Should I talk about more personal stuff? He will happily discuss computer code for two hours if I let him. Radhika, take control.*

‘You like your job?’ I said.

Brijesh shrugged. ‘It’s nice. A lot of smart people. Always stuff happening. Pays well. Stock options. Flexi time. . .’

‘What about that start-up idea?’ I said. He had mentioned setting up his own software company when we’d met earlier.

‘That’s there. I still want to do it,’ Brijesh said. ‘So then?’

‘Facebook is hard to leave. The salary, stock options and benefits. Plus, I would need funding.

Arranging all that, leaving that level of security takes a lot. Just simpler this way.’ I nodded. We had to talk beyond work. Fortunately, he switched topics.

‘I love Goa,’ he said. ‘I am here after a decade. We came here from our engineering college.

Of course, not to such fancy resorts. We stayed in a simple place. Ate at the shacks.’ ‘I love the shacks.’

‘You will love San Francisco too,’ he said.

‘I have lived in New York. Never on the West Coast.’ ‘California is different from New York. More laid-back.’

‘Even our group at Goldman is supposed to be more chilled out in San Francisco.’ ‘How’s that coming along? Your transfer done?’

My phone buzzed twice.

‘Sorry, phone. Maybe mom needs something,’ I said. ‘Sure,’ Brijesh said.

I had two messages from an unknown number. The number started with ‘+1’. Someone in the USA, I figured.

‘Hey, heard you are getting married. True?’ said the first message. ‘This is Debu, by the way. Hope you remember me,’ said the second.

Debu? Debashish Sen! After what, like, three years? Debu was messaging me? ‘Hi,’ I typed back. He replied immediately.

‘Hi, Radhika. How are you? Took me a while to hunt for your number. Been wanting to talk to

you.’ hand.

‘Everything okay?’ Brijesh said, noticing how preoccupied I was with my phone.

‘Huh? Yeah, all good,’ I said, my voice nervous. I lowered the phone and clenched it in my

‘So, all done?’ Brijesh said. ‘What?’

‘Your transfer. We were just talking about it.’

‘Huh? Yes, yes. It’s done, mostly. I will have to shuttle between London and San Francisco a

few times, for my existing investments. But it is done.’

My phone buzzed three more times, vibrating in my hand. I should have ignored it. However, there is something about buzzing phones—my obsessive-compulsive disorder makes me look at them. After all, it could be mom or Aditi didi. It wasn’t.

‘Hey baby. I just want to say I am sorry,’ Debu’s message said. He continued: ‘I found out you are getting married.’

‘I couldn’t believe it.’ I had to reply to this.

‘Why? You didn’t think anyone would?’ I typed back.

Having reached the end of the garden, Brijesh and I turned around to stroll back.

‘We have to find a place to stay. Facebook is in Menlo Park, Goldman Sachs is downtown, right?’ Brijesh said.

‘Huh? What is downtown?’ I said, my mind still on Debu’s message.

‘Goldman Sachs. San Francisco office,’ Brijesh said, each word slow and deliberate. After

all, he was speaking to a distracted idiot like me.

‘Yeah, Goldman is on California Street, downtown.’

My phone buzzed a few more times. I swore to myself not to check it. I focused on Brijesh.

‘So we have to decide whether we’ll stay downtown or near Menlo Park, which is in Palo Alto,’ Brijesh said.

‘Yeah, sure.’ ‘Sure what?’

‘You are right.’ I had no idea what he just said.

‘I said you have to choose. Downtown or Palo Alto?’ ‘Why do I have to choose?’

‘Radhika, are you okay? I said, we have to choose where we’ll stay.’ I finally figured out the conversation.

‘Uh-oh. Well, I am easy, actually. You are already staying in Menlo Park, right?’ ‘Yeah, but my lease expires in two months.’

Just one little peek, I told myself. I will have a quick look at the phone and then pay full attention to Brijesh.

I lifted the phone. Among the many messages from Debu, one read: ‘I love you.’

*Fuck*. Fortunately, I did not blurt the word out. I immediately shut the phone. I placed my hand on my face.

‘I was keen to move out anyway,’ Brijesh said. ‘Radhika, are you okay? Everything under control?’

‘Actually, I need to go back. Mom needs something. Jewellery issues,’ I said. ‘Ah. Indian weddings,’ Brijesh said.

Yeah, I had lied to my husband-to-be, within one hour of his arrival. What a wonderful bride I am going to make, isn’t it? See, I told you, you won’t like me very much.

‘So I will see you again soon?’ I said.

‘Of course,’ Brijesh said, with a twinkle in his eye. ‘I am going to be your husband, you are going to see me all the time. Come, let’s walk back.’

I gripped my phone tight as if otherwise the messages would leak out and fall on the floor. Brijesh left me at the lift lobby, where he met one of his cousins who wanted to talk to him. The lift door shut. I pressed the button to the fourth floor, and took a deep breath. I checked my phone. It had tons of messages from Debu.

‘For the past few months I have been thinking of you constantly.’ ‘Only had the courage to text you now.’

‘I made the biggest mistake. I didn’t value you.’ ‘I love you.’

*What the hell is he talking about?*

Ting! The lift reached my floor. I walked up to my room and rang the bell. Aditi didi opened the door.

‘Where were you?’ She gave me a mischievous look. ‘With Brijesh?’

I smiled, as if caught red-handed. *I am the coy bride. I have to smile whenever my would-be- husband is mentioned*.

Didi had opened one of her suitcases. It was the kind of giant bag murderers use to hide bodies. She had six dresses spread out on the bed.

‘What is Brijesh like?’ she said, as she unfolded a red dress.

‘Decent. Getting to know him,’ I said, plonking myself on the sofa. I took out my phone again.

*Why? Why am I taking out my phone again?*

Aditi didi continued to talk. ‘I didn’t know Anil at all before marriage. You just get to know each other better after the wedding. The honeymoon helps.’ She winked at me.

I nodded, even as I wondered what to reply to Debu.

‘I really do,’ Debu texted again. The guy who earlier took ten days to reply to a text was now sending ten texts a minute.

‘Are you high?’ I replied. Debu and I ended up having a chat.

‘No. It is 5 in the morning here. I am having my coffee. This is not a drunk text.’ ‘Good. Then you need to know I am getting married in five days.’

‘What? So soon?’

‘Yes. Guests are already here.’ ‘Whom are you getting married to?’

‘Someone not as insecure as you. . .’ I typed and deleted. ‘Brijesh Gulati. . .’ I typed and deleted again.

I decided to not reply. Didi held up two dresses, one blue and one red.

‘Which one should I wear for tomorrow’s bachelorette? Honest opinion,’ she said. ‘Both are good. Which is your favourite?’ I said.

‘I like the red. But it’s really short. Is it screaming for attention too much?’ she said.

*Of course, it is. But that’s what you have always wanted, sister. Why stop yourself now?*

‘It’s fine. Wear whatever you like,’ I said.

‘I’ll wear the blue. It’s to the knees. More elder-sister-of-the-bride types.’ ‘You are only a year older.’

‘Yeah, that is also true. And tomorrow is the only day I get to wear a Western dress. I only wear Indian after that. I am one of the few girls here who can actually carry off a dress like this.’

She lifted her red dress. Yes, Aditi didi with her super-slim soup-and-salad-diet figure could carry it off.

‘Red, didi. End of debate,’ I said. My phone buzzed.

‘Babes, who are you getting married to?’ Debu said.

I replied, ‘It doesn’t matter. You are not in my life anymore, Debashish.’ ‘Can you call me Debu at least?’

‘I am busy, Debashish. I don’t have time for this.’ ‘Where’s the wedding?’

I didn’t respond.

‘You didn’t invite me?’ he said, needling me again.

Asshole, you didn’t even return my calls, I wanted to say but didn’t.

My phone rang. Debu was trying to call me. I cut the call. I typed back a message. ‘Don’t call me. I told you I am busy. There are people around.’

‘So just reply to me. Where is the wedding?’ ‘Why?’

‘Just curious.’ ‘Whatever,’ I typed back.

‘I can call friends around and find out. So why don’t you just tell me?’ ‘Goa.’

‘Wow! Destination wedding and all.’

I didn’t respond. To distract myself I asked Aditi didi a deep existential question: ‘What shoes are you wearing with this?’

‘Oh see, now that’s an issue too. I have these four-inch-heel red stilettos, but that’s definitely attention-seeking.’

‘Yeah, plus we are going dancing. Would be difficult in high heels. I am wearing flats.’

My sister feels her deepest bond with me when I discuss clothes and shoes with her. She came up to me and pulled my cheeks. ‘You can’t wear flats for your bachelorette. How cute you are. You don’t know anything.’

Yes, I may be a distressed debt specialist. I may have rescued bankrupt companies and structured complex takeovers. I may be a vice president at Goldman Sachs. But if I prefer flats because they are comfortable, I know nothing. I had kept a black dress for tomorrow’s party. Didi had a look at it. ‘Too simple,’ she said. She went on to accessorize it for me. As she opened her jewellery box, I checked my phone again.

‘Where in Goa?’ Debu had sent me a message. ‘Why?’ I said.

‘Can I call, please?’ he said. ‘No.’

‘It’s at a resort?’ he said.

‘Debu, you are in New York. Focus on your work there. Didn’t you have a girlfriend?’ ‘Who?’

‘Never mind.’

‘I am sorry, Rad.’

‘It’s okay. Life goes on. It has gone on.’

‘Yeah, true. But I made the biggest mistake. And you are getting married now. Like now!’ I sent a smiley back.

‘Where will you live after your marriage? Hong Kong?’ ‘No. I moved to London from Hong Kong a year ago.’ ‘Oh. So London?’

‘San Francisco.’ ‘Ah. IT guy?’

‘I have to go, Debashish.’ ‘Still mad at me?’

‘No. I really have to go. I have to get ready for dinner with the guests.’ ‘Okay. I am just asking casually. Where is the wedding?’

‘Marriott,’ I said.

‘Nice! Must be beautiful.’

‘Stop chatting on your phone. Who are you talking to anyway? Everyone we know is here in Goa for the wedding,’ Aditi didi said.

‘Huh? Nobody. Just. . .work,’ I said, keeping my phone aside. After the bridegroom, the bride had lied to her sister.

‘Take this, my body necklace. Your dull dress will liven up,’ she said. ‘My dull dress is Prada, didi,’ I said.

‘I don’t care. It needs to have a get-up, no? It is too sober. You are too sober.’ I didn’t think I was going to remain sober. Not after Debu’s next message.

‘I am coming,’ he said.

‘What?’ I typed back, mouth open.

‘I am coming to India. Let me check flights.’ ‘Are you nuts?’

‘No, really, I want to talk to you.’

‘Debu, calm down, okay? This is not funny.’ ‘At least you called me Debu again.’ ‘Whatever. I have to go. Please don’t message.’ ‘See you soon. Bye.’

‘Go to work. Bye.’

‘Again you are lost in your phone. What is wrong with you?’ Aditi didi said. I looked up as I re-entered the real world.

‘Everyone’s meeting for dinner soon. Get ready.’ ‘Can’t I go like this? I just wore this.’

‘No. You are the bride.’

‘So? I have to change every two hours?’

‘Just go shower, okay? And don’t take your phone inside.’

## 

‘Didi, let’s go, the bus is waiting,’ I said. Aditi didi had spent the last two hours changing in and out of a dozen dresses. Finally, she wore the red one she’d always wanted to wear.

‘Is it showing too much cleavage?’ she said.

*Isn’t that what you want? I am the bride, goddammit. It is my bachelorette party. Can’t you make me the priority at least for this week?*

The room phone rang. I picked it up.

‘Hey,’ Brijesh said. I had started to recognize his voice. That’s a good sign, isn’t it? ‘Hi, Brijesh. All set?’

‘Yeah, my gang is on the bus. I am calling from the reception.’

‘Oh, you boys go ahead. The driver knows Club Cubana, right?’ I said. ‘Yeah, he does, it is in Arpora. Your bus for LPK is here too. Coming?’ ‘Soon.’

‘I wish we were going to the same place,’ Brijesh said.

I laughed. ‘That’s sweet, Brijesh, but that’s the point of a bachelor party. Your last night out without the annoying spouse. Boys and girls go separately tonight.’

‘You are not annoying,’ he said. ‘Clearly you don’t know me yet.’

‘I wanted to see you before we left. My gang wanted to see all the dressed-up Mehta girls.’ ‘Your gang is not laying an eye on my innocent cousins.’

I ended the call and turned to Aditi didi, who continued to adjust her dress in front of the mirror. ‘Didi, you do realize it is *my* bachelorette?’



‘There it is,’ said Jyoti, my second cousin, pointing at a huge flaming-yellow lit-up sign for Love Passion Karma or LPK. The club, half an hour from the hotel, was located at the waterfront of Nerul River and decorated in an over-the-top Paleolithic era theme, with stone caves and giant stone statues of the early man on the lawn. We were a group of fifteen girls. Suraj had also arranged two bouncers for us. We had a table in a semi-private area, with balloons and champagne bottles.

*Nice job, Suraj*, I thought.

‘Some of the girls seem too young, madam,’ the club owner told Aditi didi.

‘Everyone is above eighteen,’ didi said firmly.

‘Some people in your group do look underage, ma’am,’ he said. ‘It’s okay. Give them soft drinks. But get my sister drunk tonight.’

‘No, didi,’ I said in vain as the owner brought a round of tequila shots. I had to take two. Jyoti asked for another round. Rajni, our neighbour’s daughter, wanted the music louder. Shruti, my childhood friend from school, wanted Honey Singh songs. Saloni, Aditi didi’s best friend, felt we should play drinking games until someone puked. There is nothing as crazy as fifteen Punjabi girls determined to go out of control. I took out my phone. I had a message from Brijesh.

‘Club Cubana is nice. Thanks.’

‘You are welcome. How is it going?’ I said. ‘Three drinks down. And you?’

‘Was made to consume tequila shots.’

‘Wow. Wait, the boys are teasing me for chatting with you.’ ‘Ha ha, go have fun.’ I kept my phone aside.

Aditi didi wanted to raise a toast. Two waiters arrived and poured champagne for everyone. ‘For my only darling sweetest sister. Someone who only studied and worked hard. She did

nothing naughty in life. Nothing bad ever.’

*Yeah right,* I thought but simply smiled as Aditi didi continued, ‘Oh yes, she’s the good girl. If I barely passed, she topped. If I became a housewife, she became a hi-fi banker. If I had the boobs, she had the brains.’

All the girls laughed. The muscular bouncers blushed. My phone buzzed. *Must be Brijesh*, I thought. *He’s sweet. He’s trying to make a connection.*

‘Hey, am at JFK airport. Figuring out last-minute tickets,’ Debu had messaged instead. ‘What?’ I typed back.

‘Fifteen hours to Mumbai. Then a quick connection to Goa.’ ‘Debu, are you serious? Stop it, will you?’

Aditi didi caught me staring at my phone.

‘Look at my baby, chatting with her husband-to-be. At least leave him on your girls’ night out,’ she said. Everyone laughed. Aditi didi took a big gulp of the champagne. I gulped at what I saw next.

Debu had sent me a picture of the Air India counter at JFK. He followed it up with a smiley. ‘Take another shot,’ one of my cousins egged me.

*Yeah, just shoot me instead.*

‘Miss you,’ said another message.

‘Will you shut the fuck up and go home?’ I typed in response. Damn, I almost pressed send before I realized the last ‘miss you’ message had come from Brijesh.

I deleted what I had written and retyped, ‘Aww, sweet,’ adding a few smileys. I couldn’t think of anything more imaginative. With care I switched chats from Brijesh to Debu.

‘Please don’t bother me. Go home,’ I said.

‘Girls,’ my sister made an announcement, ‘what say we take away the bride’s phone for the evening?’

‘Huh? No, didi, no,’ I said in vain as Aditi didi snatched my phone from my hands and placed it in her handbag.

‘It’s your last night out as a bachelorette. You better do crazy things and not waste it on the phone,’ Aditi didi said.

I wanted to tell her I had enough craziness happening on the phone.

‘Okay,’ Aditi didi announced. ‘Let’s play “challenge the bride”. Everyone will give the bride a dare. And Radhika has to do it.’

I looked around. Our table was in one corner of the restaurant. In the middle, several people sat on bar stools. Half the customers were Indians who had come to Goa for the Christmas holidays. Others were mostly European and American tourists.

Jyoti gave me the first task.

‘See that bald white guy over there.’ She pointed at a forty-something man sitting at the bar. ‘Find out his name and the country he comes from.’

‘That’s too easy,’ didi said.

‘Get his name, country and slap, no wait, kiss his forehead,’ said Shruti. Everyone laughed and cheered at the suggestion.

‘No way,’ I said.

‘Yes way. Here take this. Bottoms up.’ Saloni gave me a half-filled champagne glass. I gulped it in one go. My head felt light.

‘Go!’ Aditi didi clapped her hands. I walked up to the bar.

‘Hi there,’ I said to the man. He wore a white vest and jeans. He had two rings on his right hand and a dragon tattoo on his right shoulder.

‘Hi there, young lady,’ he said. His accent sounded Australian. I had to confirm it. ‘Are you an Australian cricketer?’

He laughed. ‘No, mate, I am Australian but I am no cricket player. Like watching it, though.’ ‘Aren’t you Philip Lee?’ I made up a name on the spot.

‘Is he even a player?’ he said and sipped his beer. ‘You aren’t Philip?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘Can I buy you a drink, young lady?’ ‘Well, who are you then?’

‘I’m Mark. What drink would you like?’ ‘A tequila shot.’

Mark ordered a pair of shots. I had accomplished two out of the three tasks. ‘Cheers,’ he said as we took the shot.

I put the glass on the table.

‘You here on holiday?’ Mark said. ‘Actually, I am here to get married.’ ‘Really?’

‘Yeah. I have to go. Bye, Mark.’ Before he could react I kissed his head.

‘Thanks for the drink,’ I said and scooted out of there.

The girls gave me a standing ovation. Everyone had a shot as a mark of respect for my courage.

‘Okay, no more,’ I said as Mark winked at me from the bar.

The girls were hysterical. We finished four champagne bottles. We ordered four more. I don’t really know when we started to dance. The DJ played tracks like ‘Subah hone na de’ and ‘Baby doll’. Some men in the club tried to flirt with my little cousins. Aditi didi shooed most of them off. We had selfie binges as the fifteen of us took photos in every possible permutation and combination. An hour later, another group of boys arrived at the club. It took us girls a minute to realize the situation.

‘Oh my God. It’s Brijesh jiju and his gang!’ Saloni said. Brijesh came up to me on the dance floor.

‘Not allowed, not allowed,’ Jyoti said.

‘You were at Club Cubana. What happened?’ Shruti said to Akhil, Brijesh’s maternal cousin. ‘Nothing. We had a few drinks. Then we thought, when we have the most beautiful girls in Goa

partying alone, what are we doing here?’ Akhil said.

Shruti blushed. Even though the girls protested at the boys coming here, they secretly liked it. This is how we girls are. At times we want to be wanted, even when we deny it. My bachelorette wasn’t really a singles’ party now. However, I was too drunk to care.

‘You look too beautiful,’ Brijesh said. The DJ switched to Honey Singh’s Blue eyes, a slow couples-only type song, possibly to get drunk single men off the floor.

‘Obviously you have had too much to drink,’ I said. Nobody could find me ‘too beautiful’ otherwise.

‘Well, I have had a few. But I always find you really beautiful,’ Brijesh said.

*Sweet*, I thought. The tequila in me gave him a hug. ‘I messaged you,’ Brijesh said, ‘several times.’

‘You did? Oh, where’s my phone? I don’t even know where my phone is.’

‘I wanted to check if you would be okay if we come. I tried to stop the boys.’

‘It’s okay. The idea is to have fun. All this segregation is not to be taken seriously,’ I said. ‘Nice music,’ he said.

‘You want to dance?’ I said.

‘I am not much of a dancer,’ Brijesh said. ‘Neither am I,’ I said.

I held his shoulders as we swayed gently to Blue eyes. The girls went into an ‘aww’ and ‘how sweet’ overdrive.

See, I can be a ‘good’ girl. *Am I not trying to be a good girl?* I told mini-me, my personal chatterbox and eternal critic. Mini-me, however, had slept off. Alcohol does this to her. I guess that is why most people drink anyway. To shut up their inner critic. So they can do whatever the hell they want.

‘Ouch, Brijesh, you are stepping on my toes,’ I said.

t was 4 in the afternoon. Everyone who’d partied last night had a hangover. We had come back to the hotel at 6 in the morning and gone straight for breakfast. I remembered sitting with my mother

I

and ordering pancakes. I couldn’t eat much, as I kept dozing off.

‘Wake up. This is so wrong, what you did. Brijesh’s parents will think what an uncultured and irresponsible girl they are getting. Who drinks like this?’ my mother had said, shaking me non-stop.

‘Even their son did. In fact, he puked and passed out at the club,’ I’d said. ‘He’s a boy.’

Even in my exhausted, hungover and sleepy state, my feminist antennae were up. I stared at my mother.

‘So what if he is a boy?’ I said. Clearly, the alcohol-induced confidence had not left me.

‘Eat quickly. Get some rest. There are bhajans today. Please wear something decent. Why do you youngsters have to do such parties the night before bhajans?’

‘Why do you oldies have to do bhajans the day after our party?’

‘Just because you have started to make money you will say anything?’

I had kept quiet. I didn’t mention that this uncultured and irresponsible daughter of theirs was paying for her own wedding. One crore rupees, or 150,000 dollars, wired from my salary account as the wedding budget. Did she even care?

I had had to gulp down a glass of orange juice to calm myself. *You have screwed up your life enough, can you please behave for a few days?* the voice inside told me*. Ah, good morning, mini- me. When did you wake up?*

I remembered being escorted to my room. Aditi didi slept diagonally across the bed, still in her red dress. I changed into my T-shirt and pajamas, slid didi’s legs aside and lay down. My head hurt like someone had hammered it a few times. I closed my eyes.

Didi woke me up at 2.30 in the afternoon. ‘Get up, we have bhajans.’

‘They are at 4. Why are you waking me up now?’ I said. Didi drew open the curtains. My eyes hurt from the daylight.

‘You need time to get ready. Here, you have to wear this orange saree.’ ‘No,’ I said and pulled a pillow on top of my head.

I woke up eventually. I grumbled about the entire process of dressing up, which only women have to endure. The hotel sent a hair-and-make-up lady to our room. She blow-dried my tangled hair. The noise from the hair-dryer hurt my head even more.

We reached the function room downstairs. It had been converted to look like the inside of a

temple. Marigold flowers in parabolic shapes adorned the walls. At the centre was a huge picture of Sai Baba. My parents believed in him more than any God. Statues of other Hindu gods—Krishna, Ganesha, Lakshmi and Vaishno Devi—were also kept. The bhajan singers set up their mikes.

The younger lot sat at the back of the room. Most of them were holding their heads. Brijesh’s friends and cousins wore crisp silk kurta-pajamas. They had taken a shower in order to look fresh. They passed around strips of Combiflam and bottles of water to nurse their hangovers.

My girls did no better. Most of them leaned back against the wall and snoozed in their elaborate lehengas and salwar-kameezes. The way Indian girls transform themselves from party chicks in short dresses to fully clad, chaste, virginal bhajan attendees is almost a visual effects’ miracle.

The bhajans began. The singers had wonderful voices. However, when you are hungover even the best melody sounds like an electric drill. Brijesh looked at me and smiled. I gestured that I wanted to sleep. He passed me a Combiflam strip. I popped a pill.

‘You are not well?’ Kamla bua said. ‘Just tired,’ I said.

‘I have an Ayurvedic medicine. It works better,’ Kamla bua said. Nothing in the world works better than Combiflam, I wanted to tell her.

‘Nice bhajans, bua,’ I said instead.

The angels of Marriott brought us cups of black coffee. I had two. I swore not to drink again, ever. Okay, at least not this week. The coffee helped me wake up somewhat.

‘Come and pray in front, beta,’ one of my aunts told me.

Brijesh and I went ahead and bowed before the gods. The singers sang a special song for us. I looked at Brijesh. He had his eyes shut and hands folded. He was actually praying. I felt guilty for not praying with as much sincerity. *Because you are a fraud*, mini-me told me. *Will you ever shut up?* I said to mini-me.

I went back and sat with the girls. Brijesh joined the boys. The crowd participated in the next bhajan, one of the more popular ones. Despite the loud music, I found it hard to keep my eyes open. However, I woke up with a jolt when a bearded man in his late twenties entered the room. He had curly hair and wore a white kurta-pajama.

‘Oh God. Debu?’ I blurted out.

‘What?’ Rajni, who sat next to me, said. ‘Nothing,’ I said.

He went up to the Sai Baba picture with confidence. He knelt down, bowed and touched his forehead to the ground. Done with his prayers, he went to the men’s section and sat down. He clapped his hands as the singers sang the next bhajan.

*What the fuck is he doing here? Did I just say, or think, the F-word in the puja room? Who cares? Am I imagining this? No I am not. What the fuck is Debu doing here?*

He looked at me and smiled. Brijesh smiled at me at the same time as well. I fake-smiled at both of them. I had to talk to Debu. *How? Where is my phone? Damn, where is my phone?*

‘Where is my phone? Haven’t seen it today. Did I leave it in the club?’ I whispered to Rajni. ‘Aditi didi kept it last night, right?’

I tapped Aditi didi’s shoulder. She sat in front of me, wearing a magenta salwar-kameez with the dupatta covering her head. She sang with full fervour. Nobody could have guessed how well she had matched every step of Sunny Leone’s Baby doll at LPK last night.

‘What?’ she said. I gestured that she return my phone. She rummaged through her handbag.

‘Here,’ she said and handed it to me.

I had only 5 per cent battery left. I checked my messages. Brijesh had sent me some about leaving Club Cubana and coming to LPK. Debu had sent messages about taking off, and then one about him having landed in Goa.

‘What on earth are you doing here?’ I messaged Debu.

He didn’t see his phone. He seemed to be in bliss, lost in the bhajans. *Fuck, what is wrong with him?* It took me a minute to get his attention. I gestured to him to look at his phone.

He saw the message. He replied with a few wink smileys from across the room. ‘Really, what are you doing?’ I typed back.

‘Nice surprise, no?’ he messaged.

‘Cut the nonsense, Debu. My entire family is here.’

‘Yeah, I saw. His too. I saw the groom. Golden silk kurta, lots of red threads around his wrist,

right?’

‘What do you want, Debu?’ I sent a message. ‘To talk face-to-face.’

‘I can’t.’

‘I have come all the way. Please.’ ‘My phone is dying.’

‘Meet me.’

‘How?’ I said.

‘You say. Anytime. Anywhere.’ I thought hard.

‘After the bhajans. At the hotel gym.’

Nobody would go to the gym after bhajans. He replied with a thumbs up.



Debu sat on the bench press. He held a dumbbell in one hand and did bicep curls. I stood in front of him.

‘Are you crazy?’ I said. I looked around to see if anyone I knew had come to the gym. Apart from one old white man on the treadmill and a gym trainer, there was no one.

‘Thank you for coming,’ he said. ‘By the way, you look gorgeous in this orange sari. Wow. Just

wow!’

‘Whatever. And can you keep that dumbbell down?’ ‘Just trying to make it look natural,’ he said.

‘You are in a kurta. I am in a saree. We don’t look natural here. Debu, what is wrong with you?

You literally took a flight and came down?’

‘Yeah. I am quite jetlagged actually. I feel like having breakfast. Want to grab some?’

‘Will you stop it? You have no idea how I have come here. Everyone will be looking for me at dinner.’

‘We can go there. I can eat.’

‘Debu, this is not a joke. My family is here. Their reputation is important. How could you just walk into the bhajans’ place?’

‘I wanted to pray. For my mission to be successful.’ ‘What mission?’

‘To win you back. The most important thing in the world for me right now.’

I must say, for a second I had no answer. I looked at him. He still had his trademark two-week beard and curly hair. He had gained a bit of weight, but also become more fit. Or maybe it just felt like that in the gym.

‘How are you, baby?’ he said.

‘Don’t “baby” me,’ I said, loud enough for the American man on the treadmill to turn his head towards us for a second. I continued, ‘You have any idea what you made me go through? And you just cut me off.’

‘I was an idiot. An insecure twenty-four-year-old.’

‘And what are you now? A stupid twenty-eight-year-old?’

‘Maybe. But I am old enough to realize you are the best thing to have ever happened to me.’ ‘What?’ I said, then keeping my composure, ‘It’s over, Debu. It’s been over since long back.

You didn’t even return my calls.’ ‘I am sorry.’

‘It doesn’t matter. Now I have to ask you to leave. Go visit your parents in Kolkata. You are in India anyway.’

‘New York, baby.’ ‘What about New York?’

‘Don’t you remember the days in New York? We had issues, yes, but how can you forget all the happy memories?’

He looked into my eyes. He seemed to be in pain. For the first time in my life, someone had crossed half a planet to come for the usually unlovable me. And it is hard to keep yelling at someone who has done that for you.

‘You forgot, baby?’ he said again.

‘No, Debu, I have forgotten nothing,’ I said, my voice soft.

‘Bay-gulls. That’s how you pronounce them, spelt b-a-g-e-l-s,’ Avinash said at the breakfast counter on 85 Broad Street, worldwide headquarters of Goldman Sachs.

Avinash, a batchmate of mine from IIMA, had also made it to Goldman Sachs. He had worked abroad before his MBA. He knew a lot more than me about the way things worked in America. He picked up the doughnut-shaped bread, slit it horizontally with a black plastic knife and smeared it with cheese.

‘Bagel and cream cheese, classic combo,’ he said.

‘Thanks, Avinash,’ I said, fumbling with my plate, my handbag, my umbrella and my senses. I had worn a Western-style office suit for the first time in my life. Even for my Goldman Sachs interview at IIMA campus I had worn a saree.

*Is the skirt too tight? Is my ass looking too big? Is my hair in place?* Mini-me was in overdrive, the perfect day for her to knock me out.

Two hundred other fresh recruits had arrived from all over the world. For our ten-week associate training, we had to report at 7.30 in the morning. Classes began after a quick breakfast, and ended at 6.30 in the evening.

Partners and senior employees from various departments, such as Corporate Finance, Equities and Distressed Debt, took sessions on what actually happened in their group. The partners, no more than 200 in the entire firm of 20,000 people, held the senior-most positions in the firm. They held equity in the bank and made the most money. Their annual compensation could reach tens of millions of dollars every year.

‘Open the Goldman Sachs business principles,’ said Gary Colbert, a senior partner who looked like a rich grandfather in his gold spectacles. Goldman took great pride in its fourteen business principles.

‘Long-term greed,’ Gary said. ‘Read that line in the principles. That’s what we aim for here.’

Greed and investment banking went together. Goldman was honest enough to admit it. They just didn’t mind delaying their greed, for it made the pay-off even better. Gary recounted his journey from joining Goldman as an operations assistant thirty-five years ago.

‘Everyone works hard at Goldman, no exception. If you want an easy life, look elsewhere,’ Gary said. Well, it was too late for me to look elsewhere. I was already in New York. Trainees circulated horror stories about new associates spending nights in the office and sleeping on office couches.

Two weeks into our training Avinash came up to me.

‘I have a group of Indian friends in New York. We are meeting up for drinks tonight. You want

to come?’

‘I have to finish the merger model spreadsheet,’ I said.

‘You are still a muggu,’ Avinash said, referring to me as someone who mugs up, or studies, all the time. My IIMA reputation would not leave me so easily.

I had lied to Avinash. I had a haircut appointment. After moving to New York, I had decided to leave my nerdy, unfashionable days far behind. An associate trainee in my class had gorgeous shoulder-length hair with waves, exactly how I wanted mine. She had made a booking for me at a salon on 32nd Street.

Of course, I couldn’t tell Avinash this. Muggu Radhika doing her hair? He would laugh in my face. The news would spread like wildfire in the IIMA alumni groups.

‘You are in New York, will you live a little?’ Avinash said. ‘Where are the drinks?’ I said.

‘At Whiskey Blue. It’s a bar at the W Hotel. Right opposite the Benjamin Hotel, where you are staying.’

Some problems in the world seem to exist solely for women. Like not having anything to wear.

I realized I had nothing nice for tonight. ‘I am not sure, let me see,’ I said.

‘What let me see? Just come, Muggu,’ he said.



For the rare breed of girls like me that hates shopping and has serious retardation in the areas of the brain that help you pick a dress, Banana Republic is the answer.

‘Hi, miss. God, you have a gorgeous colour,’ one of the African-American female sales assistants said. *Say that to my mother. She stays up at night wondering who will marry me with this skin colour*.

‘I have to go for drinks, with some friends,’ I said, ‘and I suck at shopping. Can you help?’

When you have no clue, best to surrender. The only shopping I ever did in my life was for textbooks.

‘I’ll take care of you, girl,’ the shop assistant said.

She picked a navy-blue lace dress for me. It fit well, but ended mid-thigh. ‘Too short?’ I said.

‘Not at all. It’s summer. You look lovely,’ she said. Even though she was paid to say it, it felt good. ‘I would wax those legs, though,’ she added.

Ouch! That hurt.

‘Unless you like it natural,’ the salesperson corrected herself, switching back to classic American political correctness.



I entered Whiskey Blue at 9. The plush bar and lounge had decadent leather sofas and dim lighting.

Avinash noticed me first.

‘Hey, you are late,’ he said, ‘and wow.’ ‘What?’

‘Your dress. I almost didn’t recognize you.’

*Was that an ‘oh my God, you look good’ wow? Or was it a ‘what the fuck are you wearing’ wow?* Before I could ask he introduced me to the others.

‘That’s Ruchi, Ashish, Nidhi, Rohan and our dreamer-philosopher, Debu,’ Avinash said, ‘and this is Radhika, guys, my batchmate from IIMA, top mugger and now at Goldman Sachs, like me.’

*Fuck you, Avinash.*

‘She doesn’t look like a mugger,’ Debu said. He shifted to make space for me.

We occupied two sofas. Ruchi, Ashish and Nidhi sat on one. Rohan, Avinash, Debu and I sat on the opposite side. The waiter asked for my order.

‘I don’t really drink a lot,’ I said.

‘Don’t worry, they only give you one glass at a time,’ Debu said. I smiled.

He looked into my eyes. He did have a philosopher look about him, with his beard and uncombed hair.

‘Wine?’ he said. ‘It’s light.’ ‘Sure,’ I said.

‘A glass of Shiraz for the lady,’ Debu said to the waiter. Nobody had ever ordered Shiraz for me, which I later learnt is a type of grape. Nobody had ever referred to me as a lady either.

‘Cheers,’ Debu said once our drinks arrived.

Everyone lifted his or her glasses. Debu continued, ‘To the fresh-off-the-boat people, Avinash, Rohan and Radhika. Welcome to the USA, welcome to New York.’

I learnt more about the others. Rohan had come from IIMC. He had a job at Morgan Stanley.

Nidhi and Ashish were dating each other. They had worked at Merrill Lynch for two years.

At one point, when the others were lost in conversation, Debu turned to me. ‘Goldman Sachs, eh? That’s a big deal. What is it like?’ Debu said.

‘It’s okay,’ I said. ‘I am still in training. Most of it is going over my head. How about you? Are you in a bank too?’

Debu laughed. ‘Far from it. I am not a numbers guy at all. I work in BBDO. An advertising agency on Madison Avenue.’

‘That is so cool,’ I said.

‘The only somewhat creative career I could find.’ ‘Where are you from?’ I said.

‘I grew up in Kolkata. Then went to SRCC in Delhi, then did my master’s here. . .’ I cut him mid-sentence.

‘SRCC? You went to SRCC? Which batch?’ ‘I graduated three years ago,’ he said. ‘What? You are one batch senior to me.’

We realized that despite attending the same college we had never seen or met each other. ‘Sorry, I can’t recall seeing you,’ I said.

‘I was under the influence. Justifying the use of grass to stimulate my creativity. So I don’t blame you.’

‘I studied most of the time. I don’t blame you,’ I said. Both of us laughed. A little bit of wine from my glass spilt on my leg. He offered me a tissue. Even in the darkness, I noticed him look at my

legs.

*Oh, so this is how guys check out girls? Thank God it is dark. I need to book a waxing*

*appointment soon*.

‘Where are you staying?’ Debu said.

‘Right across, at the Benjamin Hotel. Only for training, though. Will look for an apartment

soon.’

He lit up a cigarette. He offered me one. I declined. ‘Can I say something?’ he said.

‘Sure,’ I said.

‘That is a nice dress you are wearing,’ he said.

‘Oh, thanks,’ I said. The mix of compliments and wine made me giddy.

‘But if you want me to cut the price tag, I can. Sixty-nine ninety-five. Good buy,’ he said. He

pointed to the tag, still attached to the back of my dress.

My face colour changed to match that of the red wine. I had never been so embarrassed in my

life. said.

‘Or I can let it be if you want to return the dress. The return policy is great in the USA,’ Debu I fumbled to find the price label on my back. He laughed, picked up a cutlery knife from the

table and cut the tag.

‘What’s up, guys?’ Avinash asked as he noticed Debu bent over my back. ‘Nothing. I liked the dress. Just wanted to check the brand,’ Debu said. ‘You advertising types, always curious,’ Avinash said.

Post-drinks the group decided to go to Ray’s, a famous place for pizzas. ‘What’s your favourite cuisine?’ Debu asked me as he ate his pizza slice.

I had no favourite cuisine. I couldn’t say Indian. It sounded too unfashionable. ‘Chinese,’ I blurted out.

‘I know a great Chinese place. Would you like to go sometime?’

*Did he just ask me out? Nobody has ever asked me out. Thank you, Banana Republic. Oh, maybe he is just being helpful. He is saying he will tell me of a Chinese place I can go to sometime, alone. Is that what he means?*

He looked at me, waiting for an answer. *Say something, Radhika.* ‘Huh? Yeah, why not? You can tell me the address, or if they deliver. . .’ ‘I meant with me.’

‘Oh,’ I said and became quiet. *Say something else, you stupid girl*. ‘Yeah. Just you and me,’ Debu said.

My heart began to beat fast. *Is this what people call a date? Can I ask him to clarify?*

‘Okay,’ I said, letting out a huge breath, ‘we can.’

‘Next Friday?’ he said. Thoughts darted across my head. *Isn’t he too forward? Wait, he is just fixing a time. Else how will it ever happen? Will it look too cheap and desperate if I say yes? Will he think I am a slut? Why is there no user manual for how girls should live on this planet?*

‘Friday?’ I said and shut up, like a bimbette. He must be wondering how Goldman ever hired

me.

‘Yeah. Weekend. No office next day,’ he said, his voice uncomfortable. He didn’t know if I

was trying to blow him off or just being the usual idiot that I am.

‘Okay,’ I said. The effort it took me to say that okay felt like lifting seven heavy suitcases.

‘Cool. I will message you the time and address.’ ‘Sure,’ I said.

‘Only if I have your number,’ he said. ‘Oh, of course. I’ll give it to you,’ I said.

## 

‘Distressed Debt: Special Situations Group,’ the slide on the projection system read. The associate training class became radio silent. Distressed Debt was the hardest group to crack and join

in Goldman Sachs. In any year only one or two associates were offered a role in the group. Those who made it earned the fastest promotions and the best bonuses.

Everyone had waited for this presentation.

‘Good morning, everyone,’ said the speaker on stage in a British accent. ‘I am Neel Gupta, partner at the Special Situations Group in the Hong Kong office.’

I looked up from my desk. He was six feet tall, lean and had a muscular frame. He had high cheekbones and a light brown complexion. He had salt-and-pepper hair, more pepper than salt, actually. He wore a crisp white shirt, a pinstriped navy-blue suit and a matching tie.

‘I will be giving you an overview of the Distressed Debt Group, in my view the most exciting place to be in Goldman Sachs.’

I sat next to four American girls: Maggie, Angela, Jessica and Carolyn. They looked at each other and made he-is-so-hot gestures.

If he wasn’t a partner he could be a model in one of those ads that show distinguished men buying expensive watches.

‘He is gorgeous,’ a girl behind me whispered.

*Focus, Radhika*, I told myself as he switched to the next slide.

The slide showed various stages in the life of a business. It started with the inception and start-up stage. It went on to growth, maturity, decline and demise.

‘Angel funds, venture capital and private equity. These guys help companies that are just born or are growing up. In clinical terms you can call them the maternity ward.’

He turned his back to us to see the slide. All the girls in the class exchanged glances with each other. The girls from the Hong Kong office felt extra lucky to have such a hunk in their office.

Neel continued, ‘We, on the other hand, belong to the death ward. We come in when the company has failed, when the time has come to either try something drastic or. . .’

He dramatically paused at the ‘or’ for a few seconds before he spoke again. ‘Or the time has come to pull out the life support, or liquidate and close the company. How easy do you think that is?’

He moved around the classroom and stopped right next to me. He had great perfume on, the kind that makes you want to go closer and smell it some more.

‘You, young lady. You think it is easy to shut down factories and fire people?’

I was gobsmacked. I didn’t expect to be asked a question in the GS training class, which had people from around the world. *What if I said something stupid? What if everyone laughed at my*

*Delhi accent?*

I got up, nervous.

‘Sit down, young lady,’ Neel said. ‘Answer from your seat. Where are you from?’ ‘India, sir.’

‘Ah, I grew up there. Moved to the UK when I was ten. Anyway, so when would you recommend closing a business?’

‘When all other alternatives have failed. When keeping it alive means throwing good money after bad. When hope dies, I guess.’

‘When hope dies. Nice way to put it. But isn’t it heartbreaking when that happens?’ Neel said. I remained silent. He moved to the front of the class.

‘Can you blame the undertaker for burying dead people? If people are dead, they need to be buried,’ Neel said.

His macabre analogies made his point clear. It also added notoriety, a level of excitement to distressed debt. What Neel said next helped further.

‘I became a partner in twelve years. Other parts of the firm, it takes twenty or more. Our associates make what VPs make in other groups. I am not allowed to reveal numbers, but if you stick around in distressed debt you will end up a very wealthy man or woman.’

Goldman Sachs never liked to discuss wealth in public. This, despite the fact that everyone at the firm was essentially there because of the money. Trainees whispered they had found out Neel’s equity in the firm on the Internet. He had thirty million dollars’ worth of Goldman Sachs shares. His hotness level spiked even more.

His session ended with thundering applause. He made a final announcement before he left.

‘We only have a few places in the group. Those interested, apply with the training coordinator.

We will shortlist and get back to you,’ he said and looked in my direction. ‘Do try. It’ll be worth it.’

*Did he just signal me to apply? Did he like my answer?* My phone buzzed. Debu had sent a message.

‘Tao restaurant. 58th Street and Park Avenue. 8 p.m. Okay?’

Damn, I almost forgot. I had a date, or at least a ‘let’s meet for Chinese food’ tonight. Before that I had something even more important. I had a waxing appointment.



‘Ohohoh. . . Slower, that hurts,’ I said to the waxing lady.

‘You haven’t done this before?’ said my fifty-year-old waxing lady, Catherine, politely, while ripping the waxing strips off me most brutally.

I was lying down in my underwear. I had come to Completely Bare, a funky ‘high-tech meets comfy chic’ waxing studio on 68th Street and Madison.

‘I have. Twice in my life. In India. Years ago,’ I said. ‘Really? Did it hurt then?’

Hell yeah, it did. Aditi didi had made me do it for a wedding in the family. I almost broke family ties with her after that. If only Debu knew what I was going through to have a plate of noodles with him. Catherine dipped a spatula in a bowl of molten wax.

‘Cold wax hurts more, but the results last longer,’ she said. She applied the wax on my upper

thigh, then put a white strip of cloth, six inches long and two inches wide, on that. Hair clung to it. I felt the Armageddon coming.

‘Can’t you give local anaesthesia or. . .oww. . .oww. . .oww. . .’ ‘Relax, honey,’ Catherine said.

I clenched my teeth and closed my eyes. I imagined myself in the Middle East. They punish women with lashes if they do something awful like driving a car, offering men their opinions or something totally immoral like exposing their elbows in public.

‘Fifty lashes for Radhika.’ I imagined a fatwa on me as Catherine went to work. She finished my legs from the front and flipped me around. I felt like a fish being scaled before dinner.

‘You don’t want a Brazilian?’ Catherine asked me. ‘It is only fifteen dollars more.’ ‘What’s that?’ I said. Catherine rolled her eyes.

‘It’s everything gone, honey. Down there too.’

It took me a second to figure out what she meant. Then I realized the embarrassment and pain involved.

‘Do girls do it?’ I said.

‘Everyone, honey. The boys don’t like them bushes anymore.’

*Okay*, I thought. *It’s only fifteen dollars more. I am Indian after all, and Indians like bargains, even if they involve pain.*

‘You want it?’ Catherine said.

*Maybe I can do this. This is not for Debu or tonight. This is for me. Enough of being a frumpy nerd, Radhika. Do it.*

‘Sure, I’ll take the Brazilian,’ I said.

I don’t want to go into the details of what happened next. It started with Catherine examining bits of me nobody else ever had, while she shook her head in disapproval. After that she applied molten wax on body parts that were clearly never meant to ever come in contact with molten wax. *Why do we women put ourselves through this? Why can’t boys. . .oww. . .oww. . .oww.*

I think I would prefer the lashes in Saudi Arabia.

‘There we go,’ Catherine said after her ten-minute sadism experiment ended. ‘I might faint,’ I said.

‘You will get used to it,’ Catherine said. ‘Trust me, he will love it.’

There is no he, I wanted to tell her. I am only going to have wonton soup with him. Not wanton

sex.

Catherine came back with a strip of crystal dots.

‘And as a special promotion, we are giving all customers who got a Brazilian a free

Swarovski service. Allow me. This won’t hurt at all.’

I couldn’t believe what happened next. Catherine made a pattern with thirty crystals down

there.

Once done, she told me to stand up and look into the mirror. ‘I look like a stripper,’ I said.

‘You look sexy.’

‘I can’t walk out with crystals on my. . .you know.’

‘Don’t worry. They wash off in a couple of days. Faster if you rub with soap.’ Debu called.

‘Hey, done with training? You will be on time, right? Or should we make it 8.30?’ Debu said. ‘I am done. Was just taking care of some. . .internal issues. See you soon,’ I said.



‘You look,’ he paused, ‘wonderful.’ ‘Thank you,’ I said.

‘Your dress is lovely too.’

‘Look, no tag today,’ I said and turned around. Both of us laughed. I was wearing a military green lace dress I had picked up from Gap. It ended well above the knees, exposing enough leg. However, I still don’t think Debu noticed the hundred dollars I spent fixing my limbs. The dim lighting and the restaurant table covering my legs did no justice to the hour I had spent in the torture chamber.

Debu ordered a set dinner for us.

We sat down in the upper level of Tao, a large-sized restaurant by New York standards.

Downstairs, we could see a giant Buddha and the Zen koi pond. ‘Nice place,’ I said.

‘Did you know they shot the *Sex and the City* movie here?’ Debu said. I didn’t. ‘So how was your day?’

‘Good. We are pitching for this new sportswear brand called Under Armor. If we get the campaign it will be awesome. How’s Goldman?’

‘Still in training. Busy. It will get even more hectic after work begins.’

I told him about Neel’s distressed debt presentation. I recounted how I was questioned in front of the entire class.

‘So I am thinking, I won’t apply to distressed debt. It’s quite difficult to get anyway. Plus, the job seems too difficult,’ I said.

‘How can you not apply?’ Debu said. ‘You are from IIMA. You will crack it.’

‘People in my class are from top colleges around the world. Harvard, Stanford, you name it.’ ‘So what? You answered the question the partner asked you in the presentation, right?’

I looked at Debu. He had listened to me with full attention. His deep black eyes flickered in the candlelight. I leaned back on my seat and crossed my legs. They felt unusually smooth. I remembered why and smiled.

‘Why are you smiling?’ he said. ‘Nothing.’ I shook my head.

‘Listen,’ he said and placed his hand on mine. ‘You have to apply. Too many Indians come to this city and get overwhelmed. Don’t be underconfident. You can do it. You will.’

‘Thanks. And you will win Under Armor,’ I said.

‘Cheers to that,’ he said and we lifted our water glasses. The waiter arrived with our food— chicken noodle soup and vegetable fried rice. The soup seemed a little too bland for my taste. I stuck to the fried rice.

‘You aren’t having the soup. You don’t like chicken?’ ‘I eat meat, but I prefer vegetarian,’ I said.

‘I am vegetarian too,’ he said. ‘Really?’

‘I am a Bengali. For us, fish and chicken are vegetables.’ Both of us laughed.

We chatted through dinner. He told me about his parents in Kolkata. His father owned a

printing press. It didn’t really make much money now. His mother stayed at home. Debu grew up dreaming about being a painter. He settled for commercial art as the practical choice. His parents had saved enough to send him to do a course in design and arts in the US. He secured his current job through campus placement.

‘Advertising sounds cool,’ I said, ‘that too Madison Avenue. Best place to do it in the world.’ ‘It’s not as cool on the inside. There’s constant politics. The money isn’t great. I have been

lucky to work on good campaigns. However, juniors don’t usually get much creative work.’ ‘I am sure it is not just luck. You must be really good.’

He looked at me and smiled. He ate with chopsticks. I tried but failed. Mini-me told me not to make an ass of myself and use a fork and spoon. I complied.

‘Thanks for the compliment,’ he said. ‘Dessert?’

I saw the menu. It had choices like sweet red bean pudding and tofu ice cream. ‘Red bean pudding?’ I said. ‘What is that?’

‘Rajma,’ Debu said. ‘Rajma kheer of sorts.’ ‘Yuck,’ I said.

‘Chinese desserts are not famous. There’s a reason—they suck,’ he said. ‘Bengali desserts are the best,’ I said.

Debu’s chest swelled with pride.

‘Bengali men aren’t too bad either,’ he said.

*Did he just flirt with me? Is this flirting? Am I supposed to respond with something clever?*

‘As sweet as their desserts?’ I said, one eyebrow up.

*See, I can flirt back. Nerds can flirt.*

He never expected a comeback. He took a second to take in my response. ‘Why don’t you try and find out?’ he said.

*That’s enough, Radhika, this is going into dangerous territory,* I told myself. *Deflect, change the topic, fast. You don’t want to be judged as a slut on the first date.* See, this is what I do. When I am with a man, I behave like I am sitting for a test. Answer the question properly. Act naïve as if I don’t understand his double meaning. Don’t just be. Perform.

‘Don’t know about the men. I’d love to have a rasgulla though,’ I said, my voice as innocent and dumb as possible. ‘Alas, this is Manhattan.’

‘Fear not. We Bengalis have left imprints everywhere. Would you like to go to a rasgulla place?’

‘Here? Now? In Manhattan?’

He nodded and smiled. The bill arrived.

‘Should we split?’ I said and took out two twenty-dollar bills. He thought about it for a second.

‘Actually, no. Can I treat you this time?’ he said.

*Isn’t that what dates are?* I said to myself. *But then, what about gender equality?*

‘Why?’ I said. ‘We can split.’

‘No,’ he said as he took the money out of his wallet. ‘It’s not that much. You can buy the rasgullas.’



Debu and I took a yellow cab to 28th Street and Lexington Avenue, in an area called Murray Hill.

‘It’s also called Curry Hill,’ Debu said as we stepped out of the taxi. I could see why. Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani restaurants dotted both sides of the road. Some resembled roadside dhabas back in India, complete with bright tubelights and plastic chairs.

‘Is this even New York?’ I laughed.

‘It’s Midtown Manhattan,’ Debu said. ‘You like it?’

‘I love it. In fact, you could have just brought me here first.’

‘Darn, wasted money at Tao. Didn’t realize you could be a cheap date.’

*Date. He used the word date. I am on a date.* I felt thrilled at the prospect of being on a date.

Even if at a ramshackle parantha shop called Lahori Kebab. ‘Can we have a parantha?’ I said.

‘Huh? Didn’t we just eat?’

‘I am Punjabi. Rice isn’t dinner.’

We walked into the shabby but brightly lit restaurant. Debu ordered two tandoori paranthas with gobi stuffing inside.

‘Green chillies on the side, please,’ I said, my mouth salivating at the prospect. I noticed four seedy-looking Indian guys in the restaurant. They wore neon construction-worker jackets. I caught them staring at my legs.

*Yes, finally I have an audience for all that effort,* I said to myself. ‘Let’s sit down,’ Debu said as he noticed the workers.

Nobody has ever checked out my legs, I wanted to tell him. Let me enjoy the moment. *Oh well, better be the good girl, you exhibitionist*, mini-me said.

The restaurant had Indian desserts. Post-paranthas, we had two rasgullas each.

*You better skip lunch tomorrow*, mini-me said, *there is no point in waxing fat legs.*

*Elephants don’t wax, do they?*

‘I love how you eat. You are enjoying this,’ Debu said to me. ‘Sorry. I haven’t had Indian food in weeks,’ I said.

He wiped my lips with a tissue. I smiled at him.

‘There are a couple of Indian restaurants in Brooklyn too, where I live,’ Debu said. He was referring to another borough of New York, south of Manhattan.

‘You live in Brooklyn?’ I said. Most of my Goldman class planned to take apartments in Manhattan. They considered Brooklyn too far.

‘Yeah. Told you. Advertising is glamorous only on paper. They don’t pay. That’s the only place we can afford a decent apartment.’

‘We as in?’

‘I share it. Two other guys from work.’

‘Oh okay. I need to find an apartment soon too,’ I said.

The bill arrived. I paid this time, a total of eight dollars. We stood up to leave. ‘You want to see a movie next week? Shah Rukh’s *Don 2* is releasing,’ Debu said. ‘They have Indian movie theatres here?’ I said in excitement.

‘Just a couple. But they do,’ he said. ‘Next Friday?’

I nodded. The food in my mouth prevented me from talking.

*Date two, baby*, I said to myself and mentally high-fived.

n the last day of associate training, I received an email from my training manager, Jane Rosenberg. She had called me to her office.

O

I wondered if I had done anything wrong. I had skipped class to meet Debu a few times. Had they found out?

Debu and I had watched two movies, one Yankees baseball game and one Broadway musical called *The Lion King*. We visited quaint restaurants all over Manhattan and ate Italian, Middle Eastern and Indian food.

I had fallen in love with New York. I had also started liking Debu, even though things weren’t romantic yet. *Why wasn’t he making a move? When would I have my own boyfriend? Would I ever have my own boyfriend?* Perhaps it was because of these insecurities inside me, but I wanted things to change soon.

Our next date was tomorrow. I had picked a short wine-coloured dress, my boldest so far. ‘Jane asked you to come to her office as well?’ Mark, an American associate about my age,

came up to me.

‘Huh?’ I said, as I came back from my thoughts about what shoes to pair with my wine dress. ‘Yeah. How do you know?’

‘You are copied on my email. It’s you, me and another associate, Carl Wong.’



I reached Jane’s office on the sixteenth floor of 85 Broad Street. Jane, in her forties, sat at her desk, lost in her computer.

‘Welcome. You must be the new associates,’ Jane said as we sat down.

I looked at Mark and Carl. They seemed relaxed in contrast to a jittery me.

‘I have called you here because I have fresh offers for you. The three of you have been selected for the Distressed Debt Group.’

‘Yes!’ Mark said and fist-pumped. Carl and Mark high-fived each other.

‘Really?’ I said. Has there been a mistake? I wanted to ask. Sure, I had applied. I had also met

a few people as asked. However, I didn’t really think I had a chance.

‘It’s a tough challenge but a great opportunity,’ Jane was saying. ‘Are you going to accept this or do you want to be in another department?’

‘Yes, of course, I accept,’ Mark said. ‘Am going to kill it.’

‘Totally accept,’ Carl said; his voice had an American accent even though he was ethnically Chinese.

‘You, Raa-dee-kaa?’ ‘Yeah. Well, I am thinking.’

What was I thinking? *Has there been a mistake? Can I do this? Is this too difficult?* This is what girls like me do. The boys in front of me jumped up in confidence. I, on the other hand, triple- guessed and quadruple-guessed myself.

*Mini-me, will you be supportive and be quiet for once?* I took a deep breath. ‘Yeah, I accept,’ I said.

I signed the offer letter and felt a surge of excitement. I wanted to share this with someone. I decided to call home later when India woke up. However, mom and dad would have little idea about my achievement.

‘Debu,’ I said as I called him after I left Jane’s office, ‘I got distressed debt.’ ‘Didn’t I say you could do it?’

‘Yeah, you did. We will see if I can last. What are you doing?’

‘You will do amazing. I’m at work. Busy with a presentation. We are meeting tomorrow,

right?’

‘Yeah. Can it be my treat? Training ended, I did make it to the best group. I think we should

celebrate.’

‘Sure. I can’t wait,’ Debu said. I made another important call.

‘Completely Bare? I want to book a waxing appointment.’



‘Champagne, madam, just as you ordered,’ the waiter said. He poured two glasses and put the bottle in an ice bucket.

We had come to Aquagrill in Soho. The restaurant specialized in seafood. Debu had told me he used to have fish with every meal back home in Kolkata. We chose the set dinner.

The waiter arrived with an appetizer made of salmon and asparagus. ‘This is amazing,’ Debu sighed.

‘You like seafood, that’s why I chose this place,’ I said. He nodded and grinned, his mouth full of food. I found his curly hair, beard and smile more adorable every time I met him.

My dress ended high on my thighs. I had not eaten any lunch to avoid love handles. I wondered if he noticed.

‘We have seen each other every week since the first time we met, right?’ he said. I gazed at his

lips.

*Yes, we have, but why haven’t we kissed yet? Is it wrong for a girl to think that? Should he*

*be asking me that instead? Where are the rules?*

‘What are you thinking?’ Debu said. He snapped his fingers, as I didn’t respond. ‘Huh? Oh, nothing. Just nervous about my new assignment, I guess.’

*How can a girl admit she is thinking about kissing? Isn’t that what super-sluts do?*

‘Relax. You can crack anything. You are really smart. One of the smartest people I’ve met.’ I looked at him.

*Wow, a man who acknowledges a woman’s smartness. Now I want to kiss him even more. Are you going to make a move, Debu? Or will you keep eating that shrimp cocktail in the martini glass?*

I brought my legs close and enjoyed their smoothness against each other. *Debu, make the right moves, and you could be a really happy man tonight.*

‘Distressed debt. Sounds scary, though,’ Debu said.

*How do I change the topic from distressed debt to my amazingly waxed legs?* I couldn’t. I drained my champagne glass.

‘It is,’ I said. ‘You have to negotiate with hard-nosed business owners. They sometimes refuse to pay the bank. You have to seize properties. Squeeze out value.’

‘Wow,’ Debu said. ‘Doesn’t sound like a regular banker on a desk job.’ ‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘Also, there are hardly any women in the team. It’s a man’s job.’

‘What nonsense,’ Debu said. ‘Why can’t a woman do it? They are better negotiators.’

*I like this man. A lot. Go on, Debu.*

He continued, ‘It’s all this bullshit men spread. To scare women out of a role or position. Fact is, men are shit-scared of talented women like you.’

‘Thanks, Debu.’

Okay, I had a challenge bigger than distressed debt tonight. I had to ensure Debu made a move, so some naughtiness could happen. Of course, because I am a woman, I somehow also had to pretend to be innocent, as if I had no role to play in making anything happen. I had to steer him without him realizing he had been steered.

The waiter brought us our final course of codfish served with miso sauce.

‘Wow,’ Debu said as he took a bite, ‘best fish I have ever tasted. In fact, maybe the best thing I have ever tasted.’

‘Yeah. Well, there’s still dessert, save the best for the last,’ I said.

*Was that double meaning? Fuck, don’t slutify yourself*. He laughed. *Did he get the reference?*

‘You know Bongs and mishti,’ he said. *No, he didn’t. Be careful. Always give out a chaste good-Indian-girl vibe.*

‘How’s work?’ I said.

‘It’s great. Under Armor account is almost in,’ he said and crossed his fingers. ‘I am sure it will come in,’ I said.

‘It will be my first big win. My boss said if I get it I get promoted to senior creative associate.’

‘That sounds a lot cooler than distressed debt associate.’ He laughed.

‘You get the bucks. That’s cool enough,’ he said.

Somehow I never wanted to discuss the money I made with Debu. I had to shift the topic back

to him.

‘Under Armor is a cutting-edge brand. I saw their store yesterday. Great stuff,’ I said.

‘I can’t wait to work on their campaign.’

We had a dark chocolate mousse cake with orange sauce as our last dish.

‘Great choice of restaurant, Radhika,’ Debu said. ‘At first I thought this place too fancy, but look at the food. Wow.’

We finished our meal and the bill arrived. The waiter handed it to Debu, but I plucked it from his hands. I had told Debu it would be my treat. I had a quick look. The bill came to 200 dollars. I placed the cash in the bill folder and handed it to the waiter.

‘Is it a lot?’ Debu said. ‘It is, isn’t it? Why did you spend so much?’

‘Look, I wanted to celebrate with you. My only true friend in New York. So thank you for being there.’

I held my champagne glass high. He did the same and made a toast.

‘Congratulations. To my talented friend Radhika, who will kick ass at distressed debt and show the men how it is done,’ he said.



We decided to walk from Aquagrill to the Benjamin Hotel, a half-an-hour stroll. From there Debu could get a direct ‘4’ train to Brooklyn. I had thirty minutes to get this man to make a move. A part of me wanted to scream, Oh Debu, just kiss me already.

Of course, a lifetime of brainwashing to be a ‘good Indian girl’ would never allow me to do

that.

He didn’t make any move. However, he did say amazing things on our walk.

‘It’s really important that women do well. It sets an example for other younger women. It

inspires them,’ he said.

‘Who am I inspiring?’ I said, my mind filled with alternate thoughts. *Did he notice my legs yet? Did dinner make my stomach less flat? Are my boobs in place? Can this guy walk slower so I can keep up in my heels?*

‘Of course you are an inspiration. To your younger cousins, for example. I am sure they will see their Radhika didi and want to be like her.’

I laughed. ‘What?’ he said.

‘I don’t know. My sister Aditi has more fans. She barely graduated. She knows make-up and clothes way better than me, though.’

That is when Debu said something, something even better than the amazing things he had said about my work and intelligence.

‘You have great taste in clothes,’ he said.

*Oh, I love this man. He must be partially blind but I love this man*.

‘Really?’ I said. I found it hard to take a compliment that didn’t involve grades or job interviews.

‘Yeah. You have this subtle, understated style. This red dress, pardon me, but. . .’ ‘But what?’ I said. *Is it ripped somewhere?* I thought in horror.

‘Pardon me, but it makes you look so hot,’ he said.

*Oh Debu! Bless him, gods. Give him any advertising account he wants.* For the first time in

my life, apart from when I had fever, I had been associated with the word hot. Someone in this world found me hot. Hot. *Fuck, Radhika, someone called you hot.* My soul break-danced inside me.

‘Really?’ I said, my tone as casual as possible, even as I fished for more. ‘Yeah. You don’t mind me saying that, I hope.’

*Do I mind? Bring it on, dude. We have ten more minutes to reach the hotel. Please keep praising me. The shallower the better. Make it only about clothes, looks and legs. Those are the compliments I miss. Of course, I have to say it in a way that he doesn’t think I am too keen.*

‘No, I don’t mind. Usually we talk about more intellectual and work-related stuff. It is strange but no, it’s okay. Curious to see how you men think,’ I said and giggled like an idiot.

‘I think you have a nice figure,’ he said.

*Which part, which part?* I wanted to scream in excitement. *Do you like my waist? Boobs?*

*Ass? Be articulate, Debu.*

‘Really?’ I said, dragging out the word, as if I never expected this. I punched his shoulder— subtle encouragement and fake shyness all rolled into one.

‘Yeah. Your legs, I mean. . .you have nice legs.’ ‘Oh, so that is all you like about me?’

*Desperate, lame, stupid. What was that, Radhika?* I told myself as I fished. Oh I didn’t just fish. I sent a fishing team with a trailer to catch a shipload.

‘No, no. I like your face too. Your hair. Your eyes. Your whole personality, actually.’ ‘Yeah, yeah. Now you will say all this. It’s about the legs, right?’

*It better be about the legs. I paid 100 dollars to Completely Bare.*

‘No, no. Sorry. . . I mean. . .’

‘Relax, Debu. I am kidding,’ I said and squeezed his warm hand. I didn’t want to let go of it. However, I didn’t want it to count as a move either. *Why do we girls have to follow so many rules? If he likes my whole personality, why can’t I be fully me?*

I released his hand. We walked past a Barnes and Noble bookstore and had to cross a traffic signal. He used it as an excuse to hold my hand. We crossed the road together. He didn’t release my hand afterwards.

I gave him a sideways glance. He smiled at me.

‘My sister is considered the prettier one, actually,’ I said.

‘I find that quite hard to believe. Unless she is Miss Universe or something.’

I smiled at his indirect compliment. I felt like running my fingers through his curly hair. He continued, ‘Actually, even if she is Miss Universe. I find you really pretty.’

*Sweet lies, they do have a place in life.* I sighed. ‘Thanks, Debu,’ I said.

We reached the Benjamin Hotel. We had made some progress. We had held hands, but only that. *Did I intimidate him? Did he totally lie but actually not find me attractive? Is he scared?*

‘So this is where I live. Train stop is right there.’ I pointed at the subway sign. ‘Sure,’ he said. ‘I had a great time. Thanks for the treat.’

‘You are welcome,’ I said. ‘Bye.’

My heart sank a bit. I didn’t want him to go.

‘Hey, just one thing. Doesn’t have to be today,’ he said. ‘Yeah?’ I said.

‘You have your sister’s photo in your room? Wanted to check. I am sure the claim that she is prettier is false,’ he said.

*Was that a move? He mentioned my room. Did he want to come upstairs? Or he could technically want me to go up and bring down some pictures. Heck, I had Aditi didi’s photos on my phone. So is this a move? Will someone tell me, please?*

I smiled at him.

‘No, really,’ Debu said, ‘That’s sweet. So are you.’ ‘Pretty?’

I laughed. ‘No. Handsome. Smart. Creative too.’ ‘Thanks,’ he said.

‘Okay, I think I have some photos on my laptop upstairs. You want to come up?’ I said.

‘No way,’ Debu said. ‘She is not prettier than you.’

‘Oh, come on,’ I said. ‘Aditi didi is so nice-looking.’

‘Listen, sure she is, but not more than you. No way. You have better features.’ ‘That’s not what my mother led me to believe,’ I said.

‘Must be the Punjabi thing. The whiter the skin, the prettier the person. Nonsense,’ he said, somewhat agitated.

We sat on the edge of the hotel bed, my laptop in the middle. I had a two-year-old family album open on the screen.

‘All my life I have been this nerdy, studious girl. Aditi didi is considered the looker.’

‘Sorry, she’s your sister, but she dresses like she is going to a party even for random family pictures at home.’

‘She is like that,’ I said.

‘You did wear horrible glasses though,’ Debu said. I laughed.

‘I switched to contacts a year ago,’ I said, and pointed to a picture of my family in our living room. ‘That is dad. Simple, quiet man. Just doesn’t want people in society to say anything critical of him. This is my mother. Dominates dad totally.’

Debu examined the pictures as I spoke again.

‘I miss home,’ I said. ‘Seeing these pictures I miss India. I want to watch TV serials with my mother and do nothing.’

‘Says the new hotshot distressed debt banker. Too late, girl.’ Debu laughed. I made a mock-sad face.

*I need a hug. Move things forward, Debu. Do I have to give you an instruction manual?*

‘It’s a sweet family,’ Debu said.

‘It is,’ I said. I wanted to stall the conversation with short, boring replies. Awkward silences lead to many interesting things.

Unfortunately, certain intellectual Bengali men don’t often get the hint. ‘Have you read *The Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolf?’ Debu said.

‘No, what’s that?’

‘A landmark feminist book. It talks about how women are culturally bullied into feeling conscious about their looks all the time,’ he said.

‘Really? Well, to a certain extent it’s true,’ I said.

‘Yeah. Do men compare their physicality with their siblings so much?’

‘I guess not.’ At another time or place, like at one of our Friday dinners, I would have liked to engage in this intellectually stimulating conversation. Not now. I had other things on my mind.

‘Exactly,’ he said, ‘she says it is a way for men to control women and. . .’

‘My feet are killing me,’ I interrupted him. I removed my shoes. I brought my feet up on the bed. My short dress inched up a little further on my thighs. Debu forgot his chain of thought. I guess there are ways for women to control men too.

‘Sorry, what were you saying?’ I said. I squeezed and released my toes. ‘Huh?’ he said. ‘Nothing. I will give you the book.’

‘Not used to walking long distances in heels,’ I said. ‘Do you want me to give you a foot massage?’ he said.

And the Republic Day bravery award finally goes to Debashish Sen, I wanted to announce. ‘Really?’ I said. ‘You know how to?’

It was one of those stupid things girls sometimes say. We know it is stupid but we say it anyway to act naïve or whatever.

I loved his hands on my feet.

‘Wow, that’s nice,’ I said. He pressed my feet timidly, as if I would get up and slap him any second.

He massaged my shins. His hands slowly moved up to my knees. I didn’t stop him.

‘Do you have lotion?’ he said. I pointed to the bedside table. He took a bottle of moisturizer and splashed it on my feet. I jerked as the cold lotion touched my skin. He put his warm hands on my legs. He moved them in a sliding motion from shin to knee.

I closed my eyes. I could feel his hands reach above my knees. Nobody had ever touched me there before, unless you count the waxing torture-chamber lady. Tingles of pleasure ran up my thighs.

He became bolder every minute, going higher. We didn’t exchange a word. He reached the hem of my dress. His fingers danced tantalizingly upon my thighs.

*Is this all moving too fast?* a voice within me said. Heck, I didn’t care. ‘Is this okay?’ Debu said.

I nodded. I opened my eyes. I signalled him to bring his face closer to mine. He leaned forward. Our lips met. I kissed for the first time in my life.

I could feel he had bottled up his desire too. His lips refused to leave mine. Our tongues touched. I lost track of time, space and orientation. I had seen kisses in the movies. I had imagined what my first one would be like. But this was better. Better than anything I had seen or imagined.

‘You are so beautiful,’ he whispered into my ear as he nibbled my earlobe.

He placed his hand on my breast, over my dress. He wanted to slide his hand in but couldn’t. I would have had to remove the entire fitted dress to give him access.

I pushed back his chest.

‘Is this going too fast?’ I said. Like any guy would actually say, ‘Yes, it is.’ ‘No. Of course not. It feels right,’ Debu said, one hand on my thigh.

He moved his other hand to my back, trying to find the zipper for my dress.

‘There’s too much light,’ I said. Sure, he had praised my body. However, I had never taken off my clothes in front of a man. I couldn’t with so much light.

He switched off all the lights in the room. The window curtains remained open. The dim light from the Manhattan skyline was just about enough for us to see each other.

I had worn a new matching pair of red lingerie from Triumph, in anticipation.

Debu pulled my dress off. He unhooked my bra from behind. He removed his shirt as well.

‘What are you making me do, Debu?’ I whispered as I held my unhooked bra in place with my hands. I felt I had to make it seem like he made me do this. Never mind the pre-planned lingerie.

‘Just go with the flow,’ Debu said, standard boy-speak for ‘let me please have sex without interruption’.

He pulled the red bra out of my hands. He grabbed my breasts. ‘Not so hard, please,’ I said.

‘Sorry,’ Debu said.

‘You have done this before?’ I said. He took a few seconds to answer.

‘If I say yes, will you ask me to stop?’ Debu said. I laughed.

‘No, silly. Just that this is my first time,’ I said. ‘I had one girlfriend before. Two years back.’ ‘Can we not talk about that now?’ I said.

He kissed my nipples. He moved up and kissed my collarbone. He kissed my chin and then my lips for several minutes. He tugged at my panties. My heart beat fast. Was I really going to get fully naked in front of a man?

I guess it was too late. He pulled down my panties. He removed his trousers and underwear. I had not seen a naked man so up-close. I wanted to get a good look, more as an anatomy lesson. However, he held me tight and continued to kiss me. His hands moved higher on my thighs.

‘Your legs are so soft,’ he said. I decided to take a life membership at Completely Bare. He touched me between my legs. The Brazilian had made everything smooth.

‘Wow, you are wet,’ he said.

I wasn’t just wet. I was soaked. The good girl in me wondered if he would judge me for it. He bent and brought his face closer between my legs.

‘What are you doing?’ I said. ‘Huh? Going down.’

‘Down where?’ I said. ‘Down. There.’

‘Really? Your mouth? There?’ ‘Yeah. Just relax.’

I can’t really describe the next ten minutes. His tongue felt the exact opposite of the brutal waxing strips. Every flick transported me to a state of extreme pleasure. *Why don’t people do this all the time? Wow, why didn’t anyone tell me sex feels so damn good?*

He put a finger inside me. I winced once. ‘Careful,’ I said.

‘Does it feel good?’ he said. I nodded, my eyes closed.

He continued to work with his tongue. I became more aroused. I soon reached a point where the intensity became too much.

‘Stop,’ I said. ‘What?’ he said. ‘Come here,’ I said.

He came up close. I kissed him, which was a little strange considering where his mouth had been just now.

He climbed over me. ‘May I?’ he said.

*Was I going to have sex? Had I finally grown up? But wait, should I?*

‘I have protection,’ he said.

*Damn, did the guy anticipate this? Was I too easy?*

‘I happened to have it in my wallet,’ Debu said, as if reading my mind. I didn’t want to think anymore. I gave him the slightest nod.

He entered me gently. It hurt a bit. Frankly, his tongue had felt better. *However, this is what people call sex*, I thought, *so I guess this is what we have to do*.

*Radhika Mehta, you are finally having sex*, I said to myself and mentally high-fived. It felt like a major milestone in life, on par with getting into IIMA or scoring Goldman Sachs. Or distressed debt. *Will that job be tough? Okay, why am I thinking about distressed debt when there is a man in me?*

*bed?*

‘You feel so amazing,’ he said.

I was glad he felt that way. As for me, I couldn’t see what the big fuss was about sex.

*How do I ask him to do that ‘going down’ stuff again? Is it too late? What is the protocol in*

His strokes became faster. He gripped me tight on my shoulders and groaned. I guess he had

had an orgasm. He gasped for a few seconds as he went lax on me. ‘Wow,’ Debu said. ‘Amazing, isn’t it?’

So, how did I feel after having sex the first time? Well, you know how you sometimes wait for a big Salman or Shah Rukh movie for months and then it finally arrives? You go for the first day first show, and then the movie is not bad, but not so great either.

‘Yeah, was amazing,’ I said. I guess it’s just polite to agree with people in bed. He slid off me and lay on the side. He stared at the ceiling. We held hands. ‘You are wonderful. Thank you,’ he said.

*‘Thank you’? What on earth was that? Is the show over? Why is he plopped like a phone without charge now?*

‘Was it good?’ I said.

‘I repeat, amazing. I am so spent and finished.’ ‘Finished?’

‘Satisfied, I mean,’ he said. ‘Debu.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Can you make me spent and finished too? Please?’ ‘Huh?’ Debu said. He turned to me, surprised.

‘That going down thing you did. Can you do it a bit more?’ I said. ‘Sure, baby.’

Good. I guess that didn’t make me the shy and coy girl all Indian girls should be. Maybe it even made me seem like a slut. However, I would rather be a spent and finished slut than a good but frustrated Indian girl.

Five minutes later, I moaned out loud too. Wow. I pressed his head hard between my legs. My legs shook, and then my whole body. *Okay, so this is what an orgasm feels like.*

‘How are you?’ he said.

I hid my face in embarrassment.

‘What? I said, “How are you”.’ He laughed. ‘Spent. And finished.’

‘We are stuck in this MegaBowl deal,’ said Jonathan Husky, vice president and my boss in the Distressed Debt Group.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I checked the time. It was 7 in the evening. I had to meet Debu in an hour. It seemed undoable.

We sat in the meeting room of the Goldman Sachs Distressed Debt Group. From the Goldman side, there was Jonathan, Clark Smith, who was another associate in the group, and me. We also had a representative from each of the seven banks that had lent to MegaBowl, a Boston-based builder of bowling alleys. While people who played in their bowling alleys had fun, their creditors had a different story. MegaBowl had defaulted on fifty million dollars’ worth of loans.

‘There are no assets,’ Jonathan continued. ‘The company has nothing apart from lots of bowling pins and bowling balls.’

*Recovering fifty million dollars would require a lot of bowling balls*, I thought. The bankers looked at each other in silence, sympathizing with each other for their collective stupidity in lending so much money to MegaBowl.

‘Tell us what to do,’ one of the bankers said. ‘We just want out. I can’t deal with their stupid

CEO.’

My hand went into my handbag and grabbed my phone.

‘Radhika.’ Jonathan saying my name startled me. ‘Please share the plan.’

Damn, I needed a minute to tell Debu I couldn’t make it tonight. I released my phone and

brought my hand out of my bag.

‘Eh, sure, Jonathan,’ I said. I shared the special booklets I had prepared for the meeting.

‘Our basic premise,’ I said, opening the first page, ‘is to keep MegaBowl as a going concern. There is little value in liquidation, just about six cents on the dollar. However, it is fifty cents if we allow the CEO to continue.’

‘Fire him,’ Dirk Grigly, a fat and bald banker from Bank of America, said. ‘He has caused all the mess.’

‘He has, yes,’ I said, ‘but we need him to stabilize operations for now. We also have to retrench people and cut salaries. Let’s use him to do the dirty work.’

I walked them through the plan. It would enable the company to reduce its size and reduce

costs.

The bankers pored over the booklets. I thought of an excuse I could use to take out my phone. I didn’t want Debu to leave for the restaurant.

The bankers cared little about my boyfriend.

‘What’s the guarantee it is going to work?’ one of the lenders said.

‘There isn’t,’ I said, ‘but now that we have finally valued the business, twenty-five million is maximum recovery. Or fifty cents on the dollar.’

‘We can offer thirty cents,’ Jonathan said, ‘and you can be out of this.’ That’s how we worked. Bid at thirty cents, hoped to recover fifty. ‘Thirty cents?’ Dirk said. ‘That’s nothing.’

‘Goldman is taking all the risk here of reviving it,’ Jonathan said. The creditors huddled together.

‘Should we leave you alone for ten minutes?’ Jonathan said and stood up. Yes, this was my chance to make my call. Jonathan, Clark and I left the room. I rushed back to my cubicle.

I called Debu.

‘Hey baby, where are you? I was just about to leave. Did you see my messages?’ Debu said. ‘No, I just stepped out of a never-ending creditor meeting.’

‘What?’

‘We are about to close a deal. My first, actually.’

‘It’s 7.30. We have an 8 o’clock reservation. Comedy Cellar doesn’t allow you late entry.’ ‘I am so sorry. Can you cancel it, please?’

‘We’ve already paid. Fifteen bucks each.’ ‘I know. I am so sorry.’

‘What? Really?’ he said, his voice low.

‘Can I make it up to you? Tonight? Come over to my place.’ ‘When?’

‘Have your dinner and come over. I will join you soon.’

I hung up and waited at my desk. I had rented a one-bedroom unit in Tribeca, one of the closest residential neighbourhoods from Wall Street. Debu had an extra set of keys, as he came over on a regular basis.

I had gone to his place in Brooklyn only a few times. A typical bachelor pad, it had more beer than groceries in the fridge. He shared the apartment with two other guys, offering us little privacy. They kept their house keys under a potted plant outside the house. When I asked Debu why, he said, ‘Just simpler, baby, we lost six duplicate keys in the last three months.’

My desk phone rang. Jonathan had called from the meeting room. ‘Can you and Clark come over?’ he said.

Clark and I reached the meeting room.

‘Clark, Radhika, I am happy to say the lender group here has agreed. We have a deal. Your first, right?’

‘Yes. That is great news,’ I said.

‘Radhika, we need a quick term sheet. The remaining documentation can be done later.’

My heart sank. A term sheet would take a couple of hours. Jonathan and Clark took the lenders downstairs for a drink to Harry’s Café & Steak, two blocks from the Goldman building. I worked at my desk, drafting the term sheet with all the deal conditions.

Jonathan came up to my desk late at night. He looked at his watch.

‘Ten minutes to midnight. Oh no. Sorry about this. You should go home, Radhika,’ he said. ‘Just mailed you the final term sheet.’ I logged out of my computer.

‘Well done. You were fantastic in this deal. You are a real asset to the group,’ Jonathan said.

I felt a warm glow of happiness inside me as I left the Goldman building. Jonathan’s words stayed in my head. I couldn’t wait to share them with Debu.



‘I am sleeping, baby,’ Debu complained as I switched on the bedroom ceiling light. ‘Sorry,’ I said as I switched the light off. I turned on the bedside lamp instead. ‘What time is it?’ he said in a sleepy voice.

‘12.30,’ I said.

‘What?’ he said, and opened his eyes wide. ‘You were in office until now?’ ‘Yeah. What to do? My first big deal. You know what Jonathan told me?’ ‘What?’

‘Radhika, you are a real asset to the group.’

‘Why not? They seem to be dumping all their work on you.’

‘Nothing like that. They stayed late too. Many little things one has to be careful about in the documentation. It took me a while.’

‘Did you eat dinner?’ ‘No, baby,’ I said.

‘What?’ Debu sat up in bed. ‘I didn’t get the time.’

‘This is terrible. Wait.’

He got off the bed, walked up to the open kitchen in the living room and took out a tray of eggs from the fridge.

‘I’ll make you some bhurji,’ he said, ‘have it with bread.’ ‘Go to sleep. I will have some cereal.’

‘Have something hot.’

‘I will have my hot boyfriend then. Come here.’ I pulled him by his T-shirt and kissed him.

‘Sorry I was late. Let me make it up to you,’ I said. He pushed me away.

‘Wait, eggs first.’

He got busy whipping the eggs. He cut onions and tomatoes and placed a saucepan on the stove. Ten minutes later he served me my dinner.

‘Try,’ he said. I took a bite.

‘How is it?’ he said. ‘Yum. Thank you.’ ‘Welcome.’

‘Debu, listen.’ ‘What?’

‘I love you.’

‘I love you too. Just don’t get to see you much.’ ‘Sorry, baby.’

‘Let’s move in together. That way I will see you at least.’ I became silent.

‘I will share the rent. Don’t worry.’

‘Not that, silly. But that’s a live-in. That means we are in a serious relationship.’ ‘Aren’t we?’ Debu said.

I smiled at him.

‘Keep the place clean, okay?’ I said.

‘Iwill think about marriage later, mom. I am still new at my job. Let me focus on that. Please,’ I said.

I ran down the subway steps to the Wall Street station platform. The Friday evening rush hour made it difficult for me to hear her.

‘What?’ I said, as the sound of an arriving train drowned her words.

‘Job is not that important,’ she said. I could hear sounds of her making tea in her kitchen. It was 8.30 in the evening for me, 6 in the morning for her. Jonathan had made me do a presentation twice, giving me a dirty look when he noticed some inadvertent typos.

‘It is important. I am in the most challenging group in the firm. Everyone here thinks I am one of the best,’ I said.

‘What about everyone here thinking why isn’t Mr Mehta’s second daughter getting married? Is something wrong with her?’

‘Really, mom? You think something is wrong with me?’

I stepped into the number 3 train. The doors shut. I had just three stops to Chambers Street in Tribeca, a five-minute subway ride. Somehow, speaking to mom made it seem much longer.

‘It’s been a year since you have been abroad. Your sister married two years ago. Let us at least start looking. It takes a while, you know.’

‘Aditi didi wanted to get married. I don’t.’ ‘You don’t?’

‘Not yet. Look at my life. I just finished work. It’s 8.30 at night here.’ ‘What kind of a job is this? Making girls stay so late.’

‘Can you stop criticizing every aspect of my life? I am not ready to get married or even look at any options.’

Well, I didn’t need more options. My option had messaged me thrice as he waited for me for

dinner.

‘So what do you want?’ mom said.

‘Many other things. I want to do well at work. I want to be promoted this year, get a good

bonus. I want to travel. Enjoy New York. Come home and visit all of you.’ ‘Is there a boy?’ she said.

My heart skipped a beat. My mother’s sixth sense had sprung up.

‘No. Not really,’ I said. I guess telling her about my live-in status with a guy for the past one year would be too much to share at one go.

‘Meaning?’

‘I have friends. Like this guy, Debashish. He is also from SRCC.’ ‘Debashish who?’ she said, her voice curious.

‘Debashish Sen. Senior in college. Didn’t know him then. Works in Manhattan at an ad agency.’

‘Bengali?’ she said, a tinge of disgust in her tone. ‘Yeah. Why?’

‘Nothing. They are smelly, no? They eat a lot of fish.’ ‘What nonsense!’

‘Anyway. I hope he is just a friend.’

I had an urge to tell her that we had contraceptives on our grocery list. ‘Yes. I hardly get time. But I have met him.’

‘Met him?’

‘In groups, nothing more,’ I said hurriedly.

*Why am I not telling her? I should tell her. However, this Debu has to get his act together and tell me first.*

‘You are not the boyfriend and love types. Aditi was like that.’

‘What is that supposed to mean?’ I said, my voice loud enough to startle two skinny girls sitting next to me.

‘Nothing. You are the studious types. What boyfriend and all you will make? We will have to find someone for you.’

‘Really, mom? You would do that for me? Thank you. How can I ever repay you?’ ‘It’s okay. We are parents. It is our duty.’

*She doesn’t get sarcasm at all.* I wanted to lash out more. I wanted to say, Sure, thanks, mom, do hook me up with someone. For who else would take your unlovable daughter?

I chose not to aggravate the situation. I took a deep breath instead. ‘My station has arrived. You made tea?’

‘Yeah, I did. I can talk some more. Your father is still in the bathroom.’

I stepped out of the train. I climbed up the stairs and came out to Chambers Street. My house was a six-minute walk from here.

‘How’s dad?’ I said.

‘Waiting for his tea. He still has to figure out what to do with his retired life.’ ‘Did you get the money?’

‘It was too much, beta.’

‘Just tell dad to change his car, please. At least get a Honda City. That Maruti belongs in a museum.’

‘I will tell him. We feel bad taking money from our daughter.’ ‘Why? If I were your son it would be okay?’

‘Yes. But you are not, no?’

‘So what? I am your child. Why can’t I help improve your lifestyle?’ ‘With sons it is different. It’s like your right.’

‘Mom, you know all this stuff irritates me a lot. I have had a long day. I was in office for thirteen hours. Can you please say something nice?’

‘We miss you.’

‘I miss you guys too.’

‘We feel bad. Our daughter is working thirteen hours a day and sending money home. We may have limited means after dad’s retirement, but things are not so bad.’

‘Again, mom,’ I said, my voice upset, ‘you have to stop. Let me do things for my family.’ ‘Don’t shout at me. It’s early morning here.’

‘Well, you have to stop irritating me.’

‘I am not irritating you. You keep saying “family”. If you don’t get married how will you have a family?’

‘Bye, mom. I don’t want to lose it. Please go have tea with dad.’ ‘Did I say anything wrong now? It’s a fact, no?’

‘I have reached home. I have to take the lift. I will talk to you later.’

‘As you wish. All you kids behave in this hi-fi manner now. Call whenever. End whenever.

Shout whenever. I am just your mother.’ I took three deep breaths.

‘I am sorry for shouting at you,’ I said.

‘You are becoming too aggressive. If you stay like this who will. . .’

Before she could say that my aggression would hamper my chances of getting married, I had to end the call.

‘Sorry,’ I said, ‘I am sorry.’ ‘Go rest. Don’t work so hard.’