## Amazing Heading

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Chitralekha Trailer:

Chitra's Home Trailer:

Delhi Trailer:

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"Why do people ask 'What is it about?' as if a novel had to be about only one thing."~Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

PART I

The white sheet of paper lying on the coffee table was full of words scribbled in black ink. The handwriting was cursive and stylish but half of the words were legible only to the woman who had written them in haste the previous night.

FREEDOM OF SPEECH: WHAT IS THE LIMIT?

Freedom of speech is a right granted by the Indian Constitution and hence we use it to express our anger at a particularly nasty politician or that very politician uses it to say "girls get raped because they eat chow mein". However, now our sacred right to express ourselves feels threatened in the most shameless manner. The Modern Indian Paradox is a matrix event best represented by those who are getting arrested for voicing their opinions while that chow-mein-hating politician keeps blithering nonsense on national television.

Recently, a fellow netizen expressed—

However, the rest of the article had been scratched off with such fervour that not one word could be read. A woman entered the room as the paper fluttered because of the warm breeze entering the room through open windows.

She was rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, wishing she could stay in bed just a little longer.

The woman had almond-shaped eyes and an adequate height by Indian standards. Her hair was tied in a bun and her nipples meekly standing against the white shirt she had worn to bed.

She looked at the article with a sour roll of her eyes before proceeding on to the kitchen where she opened the refrigerator.

The woman took out the leftovers from last night's meal—boiled rice and dal—and dumped them into a large bowl. Taking a spoon, she went back to the living room.

As she sat down, she eyed the sheet on the coffee table with contempt, as if it was the sheet's fault that she couldn't write the article.

Looking away, she picked up her phone and saw a text from her friend, Natasha Rao.

\*Chitra, we are meeting tonight at Layla's place instead of yours since Mala is out of town. We don't want to die from food poisoning that comes guaranteed with your cooking.

Chitra made a face and typed out a reply.

\*Ha ha so funny!😑Will meet there after work.

As she pressed send, Chitra bitterly noted how bland the dal was. She wondered when her maid, Mala, would come back from her leave. She had gone to her village for a few days to attend to her mother-in-law who had fallen sick.

After slurping down her miserable breakfast, Chitra balled up the article with much vigour and went to the bathroom to get ready.

While brushing her teeth, she noticed a new pimple near her nose that had conveniently popped up after a big bar of chocolate. Chitralekha Menon, you are the definition of pathetic. Pimples and writer's block together. Wow!

Ignoring that mean voice in her head, she resumed brushing.

After precisely twenty-three minutes, Chitra was locking the front door with her trusted padlock. Her landlord hadn't quite converted to the ideology of modern locks fitted in doors despite her repeated attempts.

With a small backpack on her shoulder, she went down the two-floored building in which she lived only to be interrupted at the first floor where her landlord and his nosy wife lived.

"Chitra!" Of course, it was the nosy wife, Pallavi Sharma. She closed her eyes in dread.

No, no, no. Not today.

"Chitra, can you please look and tell me which blouse looks better with my sari? The contrasting black or the matching pink?"

She turned around slowly with a forced smile. "Good morning, Pallavi Auntie."

Unfortunately for Chitra, India had developed a unique culture of kissing the asses of one's landlords and landladies.

"Come on, tell me." Pallavi said, getting impatient. "I have to go for a kitty party this afternoon so which blouse will be better?"

"The black one." Chitra answered, thinking this was the best opportunity to broach the subject of locks.

Pallavi looked down at the two pieces of garment in contemplation. "Hmm, you are right. The pink one would look nice."

Chitra could barely stop herself from snorting in exasperation. "Pallavi Auntie, I wanted to talk to you about the locks. Your husband had told me—"

But the woman was already gone and now the family's sad dog had come out to greet the equally sad human at the doorstep, wagging its tail half-heartedly.

Chitra sighed and petted the dog. "You're not the only one who suffers under this family, Scooby. They could have at least come up with a more original name for you."

Bidding farewell to the dog, she went down the narrow staircase and on to the small street lined with cars. Delhi had a huge parking problem. Neighbours squabbling over parking spaces had become a daily affair, almost charming to her now. Almost.

Chitra got in her tiny Nissan Micra and glanced at the rear-view mirror to see her face, clear of makeup except eyeliner. She wished the hot weather was a little more relenting so she could put on at least some basic products. However, even moisturizer made her feel sweaty today.

As she drove through the noisy and fuming traffic of the city, her phone buzzed. She looked down to see that it was Arjun, a fellow editor, who was calling her.

He was currently writing a cover story on five interesting personalities which were a part of NGOs, the unsung heroes of Indian society battling social evils. Chitra was supposed to observe these interviews as part of an office exercise in which editors would give feedback to each other and improve their craft.

She picked up the phone and held it with one hand while her other hand was on the steering wheel.

"Arjun, I am driving." Chitra said, aware of the fact that she would soon need to change gears.

"Well, drive faster. The fifth guy we wanted to interview for the cover story is already here." Arjun said, ruffling some papers in the background. "What's his name...yes, Zahir Hosain."

It's in English (with a little bit Hindi):

## Amazing Heading

"Friendship is everything. Friendship is more than talent. It is more than government. It is almost the equal of family."~Mario Puzo, The Godfather

Chitra took her small leather backpack and phone from the passenger seat and hurried into her office building.

The office of Delhi Belly always rang with happiness. The employees of the magazine worked together on long wooden tables which were cluttered with papers, photographs, illustrations and writing instruments of every sort. Ubiquitous balls of paper thrown away in anger or frustration was the fashion here.

The only people who had their private offices were Chitra, Arjun, Zia and Tara, the executive editor. But even they didn't work in their offices unless conducting interviews or private business.

Chitra climbed the stairs to the second floor and went straight to Arjun's small office that was right next to hers.

The office was silent, but Chitra knew it was only a matter of time before a healthy noise would fill the floor. It was still early, and everyone was just waking up, armed with their mugs of cheap instant coffee.

Through the glass window, Chitra saw that a young man in a comfortably loose white linen shirt and jeans was sitting across Arjun, laughing.

She pushed the door open and entered.

The man got up in courtesy for her and the first thing Chitra noticed was that his wavy hair had been cut short; a grave loss in her opinion. His skin was a beautiful brown, not the tan kind but one which you are born with. A pair of trendy sunglasses rested in his shirt pocket.

She introduced herself with a polite smile. "Good morning, Mr. Hosain. I am Chitralekha Menon and I am here to observe your interview."

He spoke in a deep, calm voice. "Pleased to meet you. And I would be grateful if you called me Zahir. Let's reserve Mr. Hosain for my old age days."

Chitra grinned. "As you wish. Arjun has told me about you and I must say, all of us at the office are really looking forward to this cover story. It truly encapsulates what the brand of Delhi Belly stands for."

"I hadn't been made aware that Indian media was still clinging onto its last sliver of integrity until Arjun called me up; I am honoured to be here." Zahir's lip curled in amusement.

Zesty.

Chitra, however, didn't falter. "I will take that as a compliment."

"Who said it wasn't meant to be?"

Chitra raised an eyebrow in mock disbelief.

Arjun interrupted their tête-à-tête."Chitra was originally meant to be here for observation, just as part of an exercise to assess our colleagues and give feedback. However, I would rather that she also participate as a co-interviewer."

Chitra's head snapped to look at Arjun. "But I haven't prepared anything."

"Come on." Arjun pleaded. "It will be fun. Just ask about whatever interests you. It's better than you sitting silently like a creep."

Chitra opened her mouth to argue but she caught the challenging glint in Zahir's eye which prompted her to end up saying, "Fine."

"So, let's start then." Arjun said, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. "Zahir, would you mind if the interview was audio-recorded? It will be for my own personal reference."

## Amazing Heading

"But what if he's waiting for you to start talking to him?"~Anonymous

Chitra rang the doorbell of Alia's apartment, panting. She was sweating and desperately wanted to lie down. But Layla, who was next to her, didn't even have the decency to look winded after their jog. Alia opened the door and let them in.

Chitra went straight to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. She took out a bottle of water and started gulping its contents down so fast that half of it was spilling on her shirt but she didn't care.

Then she went to the living room and collapsed into a squishy armchair. Alia, Rya and Natasha were also there, watching her with amused grins.

"You did very well today." Layla smiled in appreciation and patted Chitra on her back.

"Oh God." Chitra rasped. "I hate you, Layla. Remind me to never go for a jog with you."

"Continue this workout and within two months, you won't be skinny and all bones." Layla said, unperturbed by Chitra's words. "Your body will be toned and healthy."

"What's wrong with being skinny?" Natasha asked. "I would love to be skinny."

"Well, stop drinking beer and eating Haldiram's Bhujia all the time." Layla said with exasperation.

"Layla is crazy." Chitra told Alia. "She dragged me all over the park in the name of encouragement. She literally held my arm the entire time to prevent me from stopping!"

"Well, your stamina is pitiful." Layla snapped. She picked an apple from the fruit bowl on the dining table and started eating it.

Her phone buzzed and she looked down with a frown but didn't say anything.

"What happened?" Natasha asked finally.

"Nothing." Layla mumbled after a moment of silence. "Ryan wants to go away for the weekend. With me. He says that we should spend more time together."

"That is great news!" Rya said.

"What's wrong?" Chitra asked when Layla didn't utter a word.

"Nothing." Layla said. "Just a little surprised."

"Well, I think you should take a shower and change your clothes." Alia said. "You are too sweaty and a shower will let you mull things over."

Layla got up and went to the bathroom, clutching her gym bag. She looked fazed for some reason.

"I am glad they are trying to make their marriage work." Natasha said and everyone nodded silently.

\*\*\*\*\*

Chitra got out of her bathroom with a towel wrapped around her body. Shaving her arms and legs had taken too much of her limited time. She got dressed quickly, keeping a close watch on the clock on the wall which was warning her to hurry up.

While going down the staircase, praying real hard for smooth traffic, she once again bumped into Pallavi Sharma.

"Good evening, Auntie." Chitra smiled on the outside but groaned on the inside. She knew very well what was coming.

Pallavi Sharma eyed her up and down without any shame as if she were some fashion critic, her eyebrow raised. Chitra felt conscious of her bare skin that was showing.

"Chitra, what are you wearing?" She scolded like a matron. "I just read in the papers a few days ago about this girl who got molested on the street. If this happens in broad daylight, I can't imagine what they do to girls at night, especially dressed the way you are!"

## Amazing Heading

"Important encounters are planned by the souls long before the bodies see each other."~Paulo Coelho

"Hello," Chitra said, tucking her jet black hair behind her ear.

Zahir looked up from his phone and his lips curved upwards in a smile at the sight of her. Chitra noticed that he was wearing a black shirt buttoned up all the way up and somehow, a mental picture of those hipster boys on Tumblr cropped up in her mind.

A part of her itched to open that top button even though she found it very cute. It was the same part of her that left the house in a mess and Mala frustrated every morning when going for work.

"Hi, Chitra." He got up. "I didn't know you were going to be here."

"Oh well, here I am," Chitra said.

Her eye fell on a man sitting not too far with a woman. He was subtly trying to flex his muscles in front of the girl. Zahir followed her line of sight and chuckled.

"Tell me, do you guys really think girls fall for that? Just show your biceps and the girl will jump into bed with you in a heartbeat." Chitra said with sarcasm.

"Well, not girls like you but there are some who look for that. Good looks and ripped muscles." Zahir said in a rather matter-of-factly way.

Chitra narrowed her eyes at him. "What do you mean, girls like me?"

"You know what I mean." Zahir said, waving his hand away in explanation. "You were sitting with the best-looking guy here. But instead of flirting back, you shook him off and came here to talk to me."

Chitra ignored his observation on purpose. "You told me you didn't know I was here."

Zahir looked as if he were caught off-guard and didn't speak for a moment before admitting. "I had seen you before you approached me."

Chitra opened her mouth to press him why he had pretended so but perhaps Zahir had anticipated that because he said abruptly, "I think some new snacks have just been served. Let's go see."

They walked to the table through a throng of people and sure enough, the table now held nachos, chicken wings, hot dogs and doughnuts.

Zahir picked up some nachos and Chitra took a doughnut. As she bit into the sweet circle of heavenly pleasure, she spotted Kabir who was searching for her.

Chitra turned to Zahir. "Can we please hide somewhere? I really don't want to deal with Kabir right now."

"Where?" Zahir asked, bewildered by her sudden request.

Chitra grabbed his wrist and led him to the first door she could reach. She turned the doorknob and got in, Zahir following her.

The room was very tiny and square in shape. There were old, malfunctioning objects, broken appliances and cleaning supplies and brooms all over the room. A huge black trunk had been pushed against the northern wall.

"This must be a store room." Chitra whispered. "I've never been here."

"Why are you whispering?" Zahir asked, not bothering to lower his voice."It's not like he will come looking for you in the store room."

He went over, sat down on the trunk and patted the spot next to him, asking Chitra wordlessly to come sit next to him. She did. They both ate the nachos and the doughnut in silence.

"So why exactly are you hiding from this Kabir?" Zahir asked when the food had been consumed.

"Well, I don't want to sound like a stereotypical Delhi girl but I believe he is hitting on me." Chitra answered as she pulled her legs up and sat cross-legged. She always found sitting like this very comfortable.