

**THANK YOU  
FOR SHOPPING !**  
PLEASE VISIT AGAIN

WRITTEN BY NAG



## AND THERE GOES THE GATES

Galaxy Central was the kind of mall that tried too hard. Too many fountains, not enough exits. A sushi kiosk beside a vada pav stall (no one trusted the wasabi), a maternity boutique next to a VR gaming zone, and a tattoo parlour that doubled as a motivational quote gift shop. The food court offered eight global cuisines and exactly one working microwave—which beeped like it had trauma.

On the night of August 4th, the sky cracked open like a stress egg. But inside the mall? Fluorescent business as usual. The security guard was watching a dubbed Korean action film at 110% volume, yelling “AIYOO” every time someone got kicked. Zara was mid-way through its 17th “final” sale of the year (someone found a tag from 2014). And the janitor had accidentally locked himself in the mop closet—with nothing but a mop, a half-eaten éclair, and a Bluetooth speaker blasting “Chaiyya Chaiyya” on loop.

At exactly 10:07 PM, every shutter dropped like it owed money. Emergency lights blinked to life like they were just waking up from a nap. Escalators froze mid-glide, turning shoppers into confused statues. Somewhere in the distance, a child’s balloon popped like a murder confession.

In that half-lit chaos—amid plastic food trays, drained power banks, and a suspiciously wet Crocs store—five complete strangers didn’t make it out. They weren’t hiding. They weren’t shopping. They were simply... *busy*.

One was mid-sulk. One was mid-scroll. One was mid-pee. Two were mid-lie to themselves.

### TARUN (28)

Tarun had just finished explaining to a bored Bose store employee how his app idea would revolutionize sound therapy for pets. It didn’t exist yet. He had sketches on a napkin, though, and a start-up name that used unnecessary vowels.

He stayed behind to ask if he could borrow their demo headphones for a ‘pitch video’. By the time he turned around, the store was empty and the shutters were down. He tugged at the glass like it owed him money.

He checked his smartwatch. Dead. Still tapped it twice. Then said aloud, to no one:

“Typical. The universe always blocks betas.”



He walked with a confident slouch, like someone who had TEDx talks open in background tabs. His backpack carried three power banks, none charged. His body language was all puffed chest and misplaced optimism.

### SANDHYA (22)

She was in the handicapped stall of the women's restroom, filming a makeup tutorial under the flickering fluorescent light, which she called "#RawRealVibes."

"Okay guys, now for the final touch. I'm using *Moonless Mauve*—because it matches my emotional availability."

Just as she posed for a 'broken but hot' mirror selfie, the announcement echoed:

"Attention shoppers, the mall is now closed. Please exit immediately."

Followed by: *THUNK*. Shutters. She opened the stall door. Empty hallway. The auto-flush kicked in behind her like a jump scare.

"Um. What?"

She tiptoed out in platform Crocs, phone flashlight on, holding it like a gun. Her jacket was hanging off one shoulder on purpose. Her power walk was 70% fear, 30% influencer confidence.

### RAJU (30)

Raju was in Decathlon, wrapped in a yoga mat like a taquito of enlightenment, testing if the human soul could astral project on rubber flooring.

He'd been livestreaming to his two subscribers. One of whom was his mom.

"I am in the mall, but also in the cosmos. My body is in aisle 7, but my aura is by the food court."

When the lights cut, he opened his eyes.

"Ah," he whispered. "An eclipse of convenience."

He moved with calculated calm, palms together, chest bare, still chewing on a protein bar. Every gesture was slow and exaggerated, like a man trying to impress God with interpretive dance.

### PINKY (26)

Pinky had just discovered the lehenga she'd ordered was in fuchsia, not 'maroon dusk'. Her volume level alone was causing mannequins to vibrate.



She was mid-argument with the showroom assistant when the assistant bolted without warning.

“Where are you going? Who signs off on this trauma?”

Then the main lights died. The reflection of her rage stared back at her in the mirror.

“Wow. Alone again. Typical.”

She wielded her purse like a blunt weapon. Her eyes scanned every shadow like a hawk on espresso. Her phone was already in selfie mode, ready to record either a reel or her will.

### **ANITA (29)**

Anita was sitting in the massage chair section on the third floor. It had been exactly 16 minutes and 45 seconds. Her eyes were closed. Hands resting lightly on the armrests. No phone. No shopping bags.

Just... serenity.

A shutter groaned closed in the distance. She smiled. “Right on time.” Her saree was crisp. Her hair neatly tied. A faint whiff of old sandalwood trailed behind her. She didn’t blink much. When she stood, it was without a creak, like she’d never truly been sitting. And when she walked, her footsteps made no sound.



# IS THIS HEAVEN

They began to find each other like pinballs in a machine—loud, confused, and slightly embarrassing.

**Tarun** was the first to stumble into the atrium, yanking open a vending machine with the grace of a crowbar made human. He was mid-monologue about vending monopolies when he heard a groan and turned.

**Enter Sandhya**—emerging from beneath a glowing restroom sign, dragging her tote and her pride. Her face was half-highlighted, half-meltdown.

They locked eyes.

**Tarun:** "Whoa! Are you okay? You look like you just crawled out of a horror movie."

**Sandhya:** "Excuse me? Says the guy aggressively flirting with a vending machine like it's a job interview."

They screamed. Then judged each other. Then screamed again.

**Tarun:** "What were you doing under there, charging your chakras?"

**Sandhya:** "And you? Breaking machines to assert dominance?"

They circled each other like cats—if cats wore H&M and held ring lights.

**Sandhya:** "Okay wait, let's back up. I'm Sandhya."

**Tarun:** "Tarun. Founder of... well, not important right now."

From above, the elevator pinged. **Raju descended**—shirtless, mat slung over his shoulder like a monk returning from exile. He bowed solemnly.

**Raju:** "Namaste, fellow prisoners of karma."

**Sandhya (to Tarun):** "Okay this one's yours."

**Tarun:** "Nope. Mine doesn't come shirtless."

Raju knelt beside a fake plant and began blessing it.

**Tarun:** "Definitely yours."

**Raju:** "I'm Raju. Peace practitioner. Also... part-time life coach."

A loud *clang* echoed. They all turned as **Pinky** entered like a woman investigating a murder she plans to solve and commit.

Metal hanger in hand, lehenga bag in tow, fury in her eyes.

**Pinky:** "If anyone touches me, I *will* sue. Or worse, vlog."



**Raju (genuinely):** “You radiate goddess energy.”

**Pinky:** “You radiate unpaid gym fees.”

She marched past them, inspecting each face like a customs officer looking for fake passports.

**Tarun:** “And you are?”

**Pinky:** “Pinky. Bride-to-be. Possibly. Temporarily hostile. Permanently hungry.”

**Sandhya (whispering):** “Okay *that* one’s definitely mine.”

Suddenly: a soft *click*.

They all turned. **Anita stood** at the edge of the upper balcony, perfectly still.

One hand in her tote. One hand on the railing. Saree untouched by chaos. Eyes unreadable.

**Tarun:** “Ma’am... are you with mall security?”

**Anita:** “No.”

**Sandhya:** “Are you... lost?”

**Anita:** “No.”

**Pinky:** “Then who *are* you?”

Anita tilted her head slightly.

**Anita:** “Watching.”

She didn’t move. She never did.

**Raju (softly):** “What’s your name?”

**Anita:** “...Anita.”

A silence followed. Not awkward. Not loud. Just... heavy.



## LET'S GATHER AROUND, FOLKS

The group had congregated at the central atrium, under the giant chandelier that looked like it had been made by a committee of drunk jellyfish. No one wanted to admit they were stuck. But the silence of the mall—the eerie, humming silence—had started to press down on their egos.

**Tarun** paced like a TEDx speaker between sessions. He clapped his hands for attention.

**Tarun:** “Alright. We need leadership. Strategy. Agile escape methodology. We think outside the box. We *become* the box.”

He raised a finger like he’d just solved climate change, then walked directly into a glass door. The thunk reverberated through the atrium.

**Pinky** rolled her eyes so hard her earrings trembled.

**Pinky:** “Did he just say ‘become the box’? Is that a sex thing or a startup thing?”

**Sandhya** was already halfway up the side railing of the escalator, phone torch clenched between her teeth, holding onto a directory sign like a raccoon with Wi-Fi withdrawal.

**Sandhya (muffled):** “I can see an exit sign! Or maybe it’s a neon yogurt shop. Hard to tell.”

She slipped, let out a gasp, and thudded onto the floor in a disheveled heap. Raju, who had been in tree pose for ten minutes on top of a massage chair, opened one eye serenely.

**Raju:** “Pain is temporary. But embarrassment lives forever.”

**Sandhya:** “Thank you, discount Dalai Lama.”

As she tried to stand, her phone buzzed violently and slipped from her grasp, skidding across the floor into Tarun’s foot. He picked it up and turned it around.

**Tarun:** “Oof. Front cam was on. Harsh angle.”

**Sandhya:** “Don’t judge my trauma shot.”

Anita watched them from the balcony above. Still. Composed. Like she’d already seen this happen a hundred times before.

**Tarun**, now at the security office door, wiggled the handle with both hands.

**Tarun:** “Guys, it’s jammed. But with the right algorithm—”

**Pinky:** “No. Stop. This isn’t an app. This is a mall. Use your arms, not your ambition.”

She shoved past him and kicked the door. It groaned open a full three inches.



**Pinky (smugly):** “You’re welcome. Captain LinkedIn.”

Raju floated in like a monk at a nightclub, still barefoot, dragging a yoga mat like it owed him money. He flicked the security monitor.

**Raju:** “Ah. We are being watched. But not saved. Classic karma.”

**Sandhya** jumped onto the swiveling security chair and spun twice, yelling:

**Sandhya:** “Welcome to Galaxy Central’s only reality show! And I’m your host: Emotionally Unavailable. Spiritually Hungry!”

Everyone paused as her chair spun out of control and she crashed into a filing cabinet with a hollow clang. Tarun clapped with more enthusiasm than required. Pinky didn’t flinch.

**Pinky:** “You spin better than your content.”

Tarun then attempted to climb through a narrow service window and immediately got stuck at the waist. He kept talking as though his dignity wasn’t hanging in the balance.

**Tarun:** “See, this is a metaphor for start-up culture. You aim big, get halfway through... and then wait for outside funding or a forklift.”

Pinky grabbed a mannequin arm from a nearby display and jabbed him free without emotion.

In the silence that followed, a soft voice broke through.

**Anita (from above):** “Try the staff tunnel behind the food court.”

Everyone turned. Anita was already gone.

The night deepened. Tension turned into hunger. Hunger turned into teamwork.

**Tarun** tried to boil instant noodles with a hand dryer, which promptly short-circuited with a dramatic pop. He ducked like it was enemy fire.

**Pinky** somehow opened a frozen yogurt machine and declared herself “The Dairy Queen,” sticking her face directly under the nozzle before it sputtered.

**Raju** lit scented candles from the wellness store and called it a “meditative dining experience.”

**Sandhya**, now wrapped in fairy lights from a display rack, began interviewing everyone for “closure content.” She handed the mic to a mop.

**Sandhya:** “What are your thoughts on late capitalism?”

They laughed. They bickered. They shared stories under the flickering LED stars of the electronics section ceiling. Then someone asked: “**Has anyone actually seen Anita leave that balcony?**”

Silence.





# LORD I HAVE A CONFESSION

By now, the group had made peace with the idea that they weren't getting out tonight.

They'd set up a fake campsite in the middle of the food court, complete with upturned trash bins as stools, a circle of flickering phone flashlights, and a display torch from the camping store in the center. Raju declared it "Budget Survivor meets Bigg Boss."

**Tarun** lit a half-eaten mozzarella stick like a cigar and leaned back like he'd won an Oscar.

**Tarun:** "Alright. Since we're clearly in a survival thriller—let's share names, secrets, and trauma. Like a slumber party, but with more sodium and fear."

**Pinky (deadpan):** "Fine. But I go last. Like Beyoncé in group projects. Or court trials."

**Raju:** "Let the universe choose."

He pulled out an empty juice bottle and spun it dramatically. It pointed at **Tarun**, who gave a sigh like a man forced to give a TED Talk with no slides.

**Tarun:** "Okay, true story. I used to work at this mall. Mall Directory Assistant. Basically a human Google Maps, but less accurate and more moisturized."

**Sandhya:** "Oh my god."

**Tarun:** "Got fired after I sent an old lady to the tattoo parlour instead of the pharmacy. She came out with a dragon on her back and a discount coupon. Said it matched her sciatica."

**Pinky:** "That's how I wanna age."

**Sandhya:** "Alright, my turn. I once fake-fainted in school to get out of sports day. It worked so well, I started using it to avoid family functions, math, and once—jury duty."

**Tarun:** "You've been summoned for jury duty?"

**Sandhya:** "No. But just in case."

**Sandhya (cont'd):** "Also... I shoplifted earrings from this mall when I was twelve. I thought the security tag was a fashion accessory. Wore it for a week."

**Raju (grinning):** "You were the child criminal. We heard stories about you in maintenance."

**Pinky:** "Wait—maintenance? My cousin worked security here in 2015. She got fired because someone remixed 'Sheila Ki Jawani' into the kiosk speakers. Elderly people fainted. One churro stand caught fire."



**Raju (raising hand proudly):** “DJ Shuddhi. That was me.”

They stared at him.

**Raju:** “I hacked the system with a Bluetooth dongle and... passion. Pre-monk era. Wild times.”

**Tarun:** “Dude. That song was playing when I got fired! I remember bobbing my head while HR escorted me out.”

**Sandhya:** “Same day I was chased by security. I remember tripping over a Doritos stand.”

**Pinky:** “Wait. My cousin WAS that security. She came home smelling like cheese dust.”

They all looked at each other.

**Tarun:** “So we were all... in the same mall... on the same day... causing unrelated chaos?”

**Raju (seriously):** “Coincidence is just karma doing push-ups.”

**Pinky:** “You’re one parable away from being slapped.”

They erupted in laughter. Pinky wiped tears while still maintaining flawless winged eyeliner.

Then they looked up.

**Anita was still there.** Motionless. Like she was buffering in real life.

**Sandhya:** “Anita? Your turn. Come on. tell us your weird mall moment.”

A pause.

**Anita:** “I don’t remember.”

**Tarun:** “What. like at all? You’ve never accidentally walked into a Zara thinking it was a Zudio?”

**Anita:** “I only remember endings.”

The air chilled just a little. The torch flickered.

But they laughed it off. Sort of.

**Raju (awkwardly):** “Classic Anita. So cryptic. So... stylishly unsettling.”



## THE SALE IS LIVE NOW

The torch flickered again. Then died. All at once.

**Tarun:** “Okay. Either someone forgot to charge their battery or we just summoned something with that campfire mozzarella stick.”

**Sandhya:** “If I get possessed, I’m billing the mall. Spiritually and financially.”

They turned on their phone flashlights. The mall looked different. Somehow... flatter. Colder. The posters on the walls now all seemed to have the eyes scratched out.

**Pinky:** “That’s new. Those weren’t like that before, right?”

**Raju (squinting):** “Maybe it’s a discount-themed horror decor. ‘Buy one soul, lose one free’?”

They laughed. Nervously. Then a soft voice echoed over the mall intercom.

**Mall Intercom:** “...Attention shoppers. The time is now... never. Please proceed to the exit. If you find one.”

They froze.

**Sandhya:** “That was NOT funny. Or scheduled.”

**Tarun (frantic):** “Okay okay okay. Don’t panic. Malls have emergency systems. They can glitch. Or prank us. Right? Right?”

Behind them, a mannequin had shifted. Its head now turned toward them.

**Raju:** “You saw that too, right? That thing moved.”

**Pinky (holding hanger like a crucifix):** “Back off, H&M demon.”

**Sandhya (to mannequin):** “I swear I will give you an emotional breakdown worse than 2020. Try me.”

**Tarun** tiptoed toward the mannequin and poked it. It promptly fell over... and bled.

Yes. Red. From the neck.

They all screamed.

**Tarun:** “WHY WOULD A MANNEQUIN BLEED? WHY WOULD IT BE AN OPTION?”

Suddenly, from the speakers: soft music. A woman humming. It was a lullaby.

They all turned toward the upper balcony. Anita was no longer there.

**Raju:** “Okay... has anyone seen her move? Ever?”



**Pinky:** “No. And now I’m 80% sure she was never blinking. Or breathing. Or alive.”

**Sandhya (nervous smile):** “Maybe she’s like those cutout standees in malls. The ones where you stick your face in for photos. Just... more possessed.”

They moved as a group. Cautiously. Like a dysfunctional Scooby-Doo gang.

As they passed the massage chairs, all of them reclined simultaneously. The footrests shot out like projectiles.

**Tarun (dodging):** “The chairs are revolting! Literally!”

They made their way to the CCTV room. The monitors were on.

One screen showed Anita. Not standing. Not walking.

Floating.

Through the aisles. Not touching the ground.

**Sandhya (whispers):** “That’s not mall security, bro.”

**Raju (solemn):** “She is the mall.”

**Pinky (trembling):** “Oh my god. We’ve been campfire-confessing to the ghost of a D-Mart discount ad.”

On the final monitor, footage from **ten years ago** played. A girl. Anita. Wearing the same saree. Laughing. Alive. Then, chaos. An escalator. A fall. Security footage glitching as blood pooled at the base.

**Tarun (staring):** “She... never left the mall.”

The power cut out.

Total silence. Then one last intercom chime:

**Mall Intercom:** “*All sales are final.*”



# EXIT ON THE RIGHT SIR...

## I MEAN YOUR LEFT

Silence.

Then a faint buzzing. The emergency lights flickered back on, casting the mall in a sickly green hue—as if it had a hangover.

**Tarun (whispering):** “Did... the ghost clock out?”

**Pinky:** “Great. I’m haunted and under fluorescent lighting. Kill me twice.”

**Sandhya:** “I vote we stop splitting up. That’s how people die in every horror movie. Stick together like shampoo sachets in summer.”

**Raju:** “I was literally about to suggest group meditation.”

They inched toward the emergency exit. The door, sealed all night, was now wide open—inviting. Creepy.

Outside, dawn was breaking.

As they stepped into the morning light, Tarun looked back.

**Tarun:** “Wait... where’s Anita?”

She stood just inside the mall doors, smiling. Waving. Behind her, the glass slowly slid shut.

**Raju (quietly):** “She’s staying.”

**Sandhya:** “Or trapped. Or both. Ugh. Mall drama.”

As they turned to leave, a mall security van screeched to a stop in front of them.

Out stepped a chubby middle-aged guard in sunglasses, holding a clipboard.

**Guard:** “Y’all the escapees from Galaxy Central?”

**Pinky:** “Excuse me. Escapees?”

**Guard:** “Yup. We do a lockdown ghost escape room experience every year. You guys won!”

**All (together):** “WHAT?!”

**Guard:** “Cameras, sound cues, animatronic mannequins, even the bleeding one! Very Hollywood. You folks were *hilarious*. Ratings through the roof.”

**Tarun:** “There was BLOOD.”



**Guard:** “Corn syrup. Mixed with beetroot. Vegan-friendly.”

**Sandhya:** “And Anita? The ghost?”

The guard flipped his clipboard.

**Guard:** “Anita’s been part of the act since day one. Hired theatre grad. Real method type. Never breaks character.”

From behind them, a voice:

**Anita (cheerfully):** “Namaste! Did I float okay? I’ve been practicing my levitation on a hover harness.”

**Raju (defeated):** “You mean I reached spiritual closure... with a drama club member.”

**Pinky:** “I offered emotional vulnerability to an actress. AGAIN.”

**Tarun (wheezing):** “I almost married her in my head. Twice.”

They all stood there, stunned, ridiculous, and covered in expired yogurt and existential embarrassment.

**Sandhya:** “So what do we win?”

**Guard:** “Gift cards. 500 rupees each. Not valid on sale items.”

Cue a long, unified scream.

Later that week, the group met again. Voluntarily.

They didn’t talk much about Anita. Or ghosts. Or yogurt-based trauma.

But they laughed. Ate churros. Stole a mannequin arm (again). And promised to never, *ever* return to a mall unless it had clearly marked exits, zero mood lighting, and absolutely no “immersive experiences.”

Anita waved from a distance.

Still floating.

Probably.

**FIN.**

