ONE NIGHT AT THE CALL CENTRE
CHETAN BHAGAT

It's a typical night at the call centre.
One complaining customer after another.
And, as if that wasn't bad enough, Shyam has to sit opposite Priyanka, the girl who's just dumped him, as well as deal with Bakshi, his insufferable supervisor. But on this night of a thousand calls, when life couldn't look more uninspiring for Shyam and his friends, a unique caller gets on the line.
And changes everything—for ever.

Prologue

The Kanpur–Delhi night train was the most memorable journey of my life. Firstly, it gave me the idea for my book. Secondly, it is not every day you sit in an empty compartment and a young, pretty girl walks in.

Yes, you see it in the movies, you hear about it from friends' friends, but it never happens to you. In most cases I shared my compartment with talkative aunties, snoring men and wailing infants. But this night was different. Firstly, my compartment was empty: this new summer train had only just started running and nobody knew about it. Secondly, I was unable to sleep.

I had been to the Indian Institute of Technology in Kanpur to give a talk. Before leaving, I sat in the canteen chatting with the students and drank four cups of coffee, which no doubt led to my insomnia. I had no magazines or books to read and could hardly see anything out of the window in the darkness. I prepared myself for a dull and silent night.

She walked in five minutes after the train had left the station. She opened the curtains of my enclosure and looked around puzzled.

'Is this coach A4, seat 63E?' she asked.

The yellow light bulb in my compartment flickered as I looked up at her.

'Huh?' I said. It was difficult to withdraw from the gaze of her eyes.

'Actually, it is. My seat is right in front of you.' She answered her own question and heaved her heavy suitcase onto the upper berth. She sat down opposite me and sighed with relief.

'I got into the wrong coach,' she said, adjusting her countless

ringlets. She was young, perhaps early to mid-twenties, and her waist-length hair had a life of its own. I couldn't yet see her face in the bad light, but I could tell one thing—she was pretty. And her eyes—once you looked into them, you couldn't turn away. I kept my gaze down.

'So, this is a pretty empty train,' she said after ten minutes.

'Yes,' I said. 'It's the new holiday special. They've just started it.' I leaned forward. 'Hi. I am Chetan, by the way, Chetan Bhagat.'

'Hi,' she said. 'Chetan . . . your name sounds familiar.'

Now this was cool. It meant she had heard of my first book. I'm rarely recognised, and never by a girl on a night train.

'You might have heard of my book, *Five Point Someone*. I'm the author.'

'Oh yes,' She paused. 'Oh yes, of course. I've read your book. About the three underperformers and the professor's daughter, right?'

'Yes. So, did you like it?'

'It was all right.'

I was taken aback. I could have done with a little more of a compliment.

'Just all right?' I said, fishing a bit too obviously.

"Well . . .' she said, and paused.

'Well what?' I said after ten seconds.

'Well, yeah, just all right. An OK-OK type of book.'

I kept quiet. She noticed the expression of mild disappointment on my face.

'Nice to meet you, Chetan. Where are you coming from? IIT Kanpur?'

'Yes,' I said, my voice less friendly than before. 'I had to give a talk there.'

'Oh really? About what?'

'About my book—you know, the OK-OK-type one. Some people do want to hear about it,' I said, using a sweet tone to coat my sarcasm.

'Interesting,' she said, and went quiet again.

I was quiet too. I didn't want to speak to her any more. I wanted my empty compartment back.

'Is everything OK?' she asked softly.

'Yes, why?' I said.

'You're upset about what I said about your book, aren't you?'

'Not really,' I said.

She laughed. I looked at her. Her smile was as arresting as her eyes. I knew she was laughing at me, but I wanted her to keep smiling.

'Listen. I know your book did well. You are a sort of youth writer and everything. But at one level . . .'

'What?' I said.

'At one level, you are hardly a youth writer.'

I looked at her for a few seconds. Her eyes had a soft but insistent gaze.

'I thought I wrote a book about college kids. Isn't that youth?' I said.

'Yeah, right. So you wrote a book on the Indian Institute of Technology, an elite place where few people get to go. You think that represents the youth?' she asked.

'So what are you trying to say? I had to start somewhere, so I wrote about my college experiences. And the story isn't all about IIT. It could have happened anywhere. Is that why you're trashing my book?'

'I'm not trashing it. I'm just saying it hardly represents Indian youth.'

'So what represents youth exactly?' I said.

'I don't know. You're the writer. You figure it out,' she said.

'That's not fair,' I said. I sounded like a five-year-old throwing a tantrum. She saw me grumbling to myself and smiled.

'Are you going to write another book?' she said a few seconds later.

'I'll try to.'

'What is the subject of your second novel?'

I turned to look at her carefully for the first time. Maybe it was the time of night, but she was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen. Everything about her was perfect. I tried to concentrate on her question.

'Second novel? I haven't thought of a subject yet,' I said.

'Really? Don't you have any ideas?'

'I do. But nothing certain.'

'Inte . . . resting,' she drawled. 'Well, just bask in the success of your first book, then.'

We kept quiet for the next half an hour. I took out the contents of my overnight bag and rearranged them for no particular reason. I wondered if it even made sense to change into nightwear. I wasn't going to fall asleep.

'I might have a story idea for you,' she said, startling me.

'Huh?' I was wary of what she was going to say. 'What is it?'

'It's a story about a call centre.'

'Really?' I said. 'Call centres as in "business process outsourcing centres"?'

'Yes. Do you know anything about them?'

I thought about it. I did know about call centres, mostly from my cousins who worked in one.

'Yes, I know something,' I said. 'Some three hundred thousand people work in the industry. They help US and European companies in the sales, service and maintenance of their operations. Usually younger people work there in night shifts. Quite interesting, actually.'

'Just interesting? Have you ever thought of what they all have to face?'

'Uh, not really,' I said.

'Why? Aren't they the youth? Don't you want to write about them?' She was almost scolding me.

'Listen, let's not start arguing again.'

'I'm not arguing. I told you that I have a call-centre story for you.'

I looked at my watch. It was 12.30 a.m. A story would not be such a bad idea to kill time.

'Let's hear it, then,' I said.

'I'll tell you, but I have a condition,' she said.

Condition? 'What? That I don't tell it to anyone else?' I asked.

'No. Just the opposite. You have to promise to use it for your second book.'

'What?' I said. 'Are you kidding? I can't promise that.'

'It's up to you,' she said and turned silent.

'Can't I decide after you've told me the story?' I asked. 'If it's interesting, I may do it. But how can I decide without hearing it first?'

'No. This is not about choice. If I tell you, you have to use it,' she said. 'As if it's your own story. I'll give you the contacts of the people in the story. You can meet them, do your research, but make it your second book.'

'Well, then, I think it's better if you don't tell me,' I said.

'OK,' she said and turned quiet again. She got up to spread a bed sheet on her berth, and then arranged her pillow and blanket.

I checked my watch again. It was 1.00 a.m. and I was still wide awake. She switched off the flickering yellow light. Now the only light in the compartment was an eerie blue one; I couldn't figure out where the bulb was.

As she was sliding under her blanket, I asked, 'What is the story about? At least tell me a little bit more.'

'Will you do it then?'

I shrugged in the semi-darkness. 'Can't say. Don't tell me the story yet, just tell me what it's about.'

She sat up. Folding her legs beneath her, she began talking. 'All right,' she said, 'it's a story about six people in a call centre on one night.'

'Just one night? Like this one?' I interrupted.

'Yes, one night.'

'Are you sure that could fill a whole book? I mean, what's so special about this night?'

She heaved a sigh and took a sip from her bottle of mineral water.

'You see,' she said, 'it wasn't like any other night. It was the night of the phone call.'

'What?' I said and burst out laughing. 'So a call centre gets a phone call. That's the special part?'

She did not smile back. She waited for me to stop laughing and then continued as if I hadn't said anything. 'You see, it wasn't an ordinary phone call. It was the night . . . it was the night there was a phone call from God.'

Her words made me spring to attention. 'What?'

'You heard me. That night there was a phone call from God,' she said.

'What exactly are you talking about?'

'I'm not telling you any more. Now you know what it's about, if you want to hear the story, you know my condition.'

'It's a tough condition,' I said.

'I know. It's up to you,' she said and lay down and closed her eyes.

Six people. One night. Call centre. Call from God. The phrases kept repeating themselves in my head as another hour passed. At 2.00 a.m. she woke up to have a sip of water.

'Listen,' I said. 'Get up.'

'Huh?' she said, rubbing her eyes. 'Why?'

'Tell me the story,' I said.

'So you'll write it?'

'Yes,' I said, with a slight hesitation.

'Good,' she said, and sat up again in her cross-legged position.

For the rest of the night, she told me the story that begins below. I chose to tell the story through Shyam's eyes because, after I met him, I realised he was the most similar to me as a person. The rest of the people, and what happened that night, well, I'll let Shyam tell you.

8.31 p.m.

I was splashing my hands helplessly in the sea. I can't even swim in a pond, let alone in the Indian Ocean. While I was in the water, my boss Bakshi was in a boat next to me. He was pushing my head down in the water. I saw Priyanka drifting away in a lifeboat. I screamed as Bakshi used both his hands to keep my head submerged. Salt water was filling my mouth and nostrils when I heard loud beeps in the distance.

My nightmare ended as my cellphone alarm rang hard in my left ear and I woke up to its 'Last Christmas' ringtone. The ringtone was a gift from Shefali, my new semi-girlfriend. I squinted through a half-shut eye to see 8.32 p.m. surrounded by little bells flashing on the screen. 'Damn,' I said and jumped out of bed.

I would have loved to analyse my dream and its significance in my insignificant life, but I had to get dressed for work.

Man, the Qualis will be here in twenty minutes, I thought. Qualis was the make of car that picked us all up individually and drove us to the centre. I was still tired, but afraid of staying in bed any longer in case I was late.

By the way, I am Shyam Mehra, or Sam Marcy as they call me at my workplace, the Connexions call centre in Gurgaon. American tongues have trouble saying my real name and prefer Sam.

Anyway, I'm a call-centre agent. There are hundreds of thousands, probably millions of agents like me. But this total pain-in-the neck author chose me, of all the agents in the country. He met me and told me to help him with his second book. In fact, he pretty much wanted me to write the book for him. I declined, saying I can't even write my own CV, so there was no way I could write a whole book. I explained to him how my promotion to the position of team leader had been postponed for one year because my manager Bakshi had told me that I don't have the 'required skills set' yet. In my review, Bakshi wrote that I was 'not a go-getter'. I don't even know what 'go-getter' means, so I guess I'm definitely not one.

But this author said he didn't care. He had promised someone he'd write this story so I'd better cooperate or he would keep on pestering

me. I tried my best to wriggle out of it, but he wouldn't let go. I finally relented and that's why I'm stuck with this assignment, while you are stuck with me.

Now let's get back to the story. If you remember, I had just woken up.

THERE WAS A NOISE in the living room. Some relatives were in town to attend a family wedding. My cousin was getting married to his neighbour. But I had to work, so I couldn't go to the wedding. It didn't matter, though, all marriages are the same, more or less.

I reached the bathroom still half-asleep. It was occupied.

The bathroom door was open. I saw five of my aunts scrambling to get a few square inches of the washbasin mirror. One aunt had lost the little screw of her gold earring and was flipping out.

'It's pure gold, where is it?' she screamed.

'Auntie, can I use the bathroom for five minutes? I need to get ready for the office,' I said.

'Oh, hello, Shyam. Woke up finally?' my mother's sister said. 'Office? Aren't you coming to the wedding?'

'No, I have to work. Can I have the bath—'

'Look how big Shyam has become,' my maternal aunt said. 'We need to find a girl for him soon.'

Everyone burst into giggles. It was their biggest joke of the day.

'Can I please—' I said.

'Shyam, leave the ladies alone,' one of my cousins interrupted. 'What are you doing here with the women? We are already late for the wedding.'

'But I have to go to work. I need to get dressed,' I protested.

'Use the kitchen sink,' an aunt suggested and handed me my toothbrush.

I gave them all a dirty look. Nobody noticed. I passed by the living room on my way to the kitchen. The uncles were on their second whisky and soda. One uncle said something about how it would be better if my father were still alive and around this evening.

I reached the kitchen. There was no hot water so my face froze as I washed it with cold water. Winter in Delhi is a bitch. I brushed my teeth and combed my hair. Shyam had turned into Sam and Sam's day had just begun.

I was hungry, but there was nothing to eat. They'd be getting food at the wedding, so my mother felt there was no need to cook at home.

The Qualis's horn screamed at 8.55 p.m.

I tried to find my mother. She was in her bedroom, lost among aunties, saris and jewellery sets. I waved a goodbye to everyone, but no one acknowledged me. It wasn't surprising. My cousins are all on their way to becoming doctors or engineers. You could say I am the black sheep of my family. You see, I used to work in the website department of an ad agency before this call-centre job. However, the ad agency paid really badly, and all the people there were pseudos, more interested in office politics than websites. I left and all hell broke loose at home. That's when I became the black sheep. I saved myself by joining Connexions. With money in your wallet the world gives you some respect. Connexions was also the natural choice for me as Priyanka worked there. Of course, that reason was no longer relevant.

The Qualis's horn screamed again.

'I'm coming,' I shouted as I ran out of the house.

9.05 p.m.

'What, sahib. Late again?' the driver said as I took the front seat.

'Sorry, sorry. Shall we go to Military Uncle's first?' I panted to the driver.

'Yes,' he replied, looking at his watch.

'Can we get to the call centre by ten p.m.? I have to meet someone before their shift ends,' I said.

'Depends if your colleagues are on time,' the driver replied laconically. 'Anyway, let's pick up the old man first.'

Military Uncle hates it if we are late. I prepared myself for some dirty looks. His tough manner comes from his days in the Army, from which he retired a few years ago. At fifty plus he is the oldest person in the call centre. I don't know him well, but I do know that he used to live with his son and daughter-in-law before he moved out—for which read thrown out—to be on his own. His pension was meagre, and he tried to supplement it by working in the call centre. However, he hates to talk and is not a voice agent. He sits on the solitary online chat and email station. His desk is in a far corner near the fax machine. Most of his interactions with us are limited to giving us condescending 'you young people' glances.

The Qualis stopped outside his house. He was waiting at the entrance.

'You're late,' Uncle said, looking at the driver.

Without answering, the driver got out to open the Qualis's back door. Uncle climbed in and sat at the back. He gave me an it-must-be-your-fault look. I looked away. The driver took a U-turn to go to Radhika's house.

One of the unique features about my team is that we not only work together, we also share the same Qualis. Through a bit of route planning and the recruitment of an agreeable driver, we ensured that my Western Appliances Strategic Group all came and left together. There are six of us: Military Uncle, Radhika, Esha, Vroom, Priyanka and me.

The Qualis moved on to Radhika Jha, or agent Regina Jones's house. As usual, Radhika was late.

'Radhika madam is too much,' the driver said, holding the horn down. I looked at my watch anxiously.

Six minutes later Radhika came running towards us, clutching the ends of her maroon shawl in her right hand.

'Sorry, sorry sorry . . .' she said before we could say anything.

'What?' I asked her as the Qualis moved on again.

'Nothing. I was making almond milk for my mother-in-law and it took longer than I thought to crush the almonds,' she said, leaning back exhausted in her seat in the middle.

'Ask Mother-in-law to make her own milk,' I suggested.

'C'mon, Shyam,' she said, 'she's so old, it's the least I can do.'

'Yeah, right,' I shrugged. 'Just that and cooking three meals a day and household chores and working all night and . . .'

'Don't talk about it,' she said. 'Any news on the call centre? I'm nervous.'

'Nothing new from what Vroom told me. Call volumes are at an all-time low—Connexions is doomed. It's just a question of when,' I said.

'Really?' Her eyes widened.

It was true. You might have heard of those swanky, new-age call centres where everything is hunky-dory, there are plenty of clients and agents get aromatherapy massages. Well, Connexions was not one of them. We were sustained by our one and only client, Western Computers and Appliances, and even their call flow had dwindled. Rumours that the call centre would collapse floated around every day.

The Qualis moved painfully slowly. It was a heavy wedding day in Delhi and on every street there was a procession. We edged forward as the driver dodged several fat grooms on their over-burdened horses.

'I need this job. Anuj and I need to save,' Radhika said, more to

herself. Anuj was Radhika's husband. She married him three years ago after a whirlwind courtship and now they lived with Anuj's ultra-traditional parents.

The driver drove to Esha Singh's (or agent Eliza Singer's) place next. She was already outside her house.

As Esha got in the smell of expensive perfume filled the vehicle. She sat next to Radhika in the middle row and removed her suede jacket.

'Mmm, nice. What is it?' Radhika said.

'You noticed.' Esha was pleased. 'Escape by Calvin Klein.' She adjusted the tassels at the end of her long, dark brown skirt.

'Oooh. Have you been shopping?' Radhika said.

'Call it a momentary lapse of reason,' Esha said.

I looked at Esha again. Her dress sense is impeccable. Her sleeveless coffee-coloured top contrasted perfectly with her skirt and she wore chunky brown earrings that looked edible and lipstick as thick as cocoa.

'The Lakmé India Fashion Week is in four months. My agent is trying to get me an assignment,' Esha said to Radhika.

Esha wants to become a model. She's hot, at least according to people at the call centre. Two months ago, some agents in the Western Computers bay conducted a stupid poll around the office. People voted for various titles, like who is hot, who is handsome and who is pretty. Esha won the title of the 'hottest chick at Connexions'. She was very dismissive of the poll results, but from that day on there's been just a tiny hint of vanity about her. Otherwise, though, she's fine. She moved to Delhi from Chandigarh a year ago, against her parents' wishes. The call-centre job gives her a regular income, but during the day she tries to get modelling assignments. She's taken part in some low-key fashion shows in West Delhi, but apart from that, nothing big has come her way so far.

Priyanka once told me that she thought Esha was 'too short to be a real model'. But Priyanka doesn't know crap. Esha is five-five, only two inches shorter than me (and one inch taller in her heels). I think that's pretty tall for a girl. Esha is only twenty-two, give her a chance. I think Priyanka is just jealous. Priyanka wasn't even considered for the hottest chick award. Priyanka is nice-looking, and she did get a nomination for the 'call-centre cutie award', but she didn't win. Some girl in HR won that.

We had to pick up Vroom next; his real name is Varun Malhotra (or agent Victor Mell), but everyone calls him Vroom because of his love for anything on wheels.

The Qualis turned into Vroom's road to find him beside his motorbike, waiting.

'What's the bike for?' I said, craning out of the window.

'I'm going on my own,' Vroom said, adjusting his leather gloves. He wore black jeans and trekking shoes that made his thin legs look extra long. His dark blue sweatshirt had the Ferrari horse logo on it.

'Are you crazy?' I said. 'It's so cold. Get in, we're late already.'

'No, I feel stressed today. I need to get it out of my system with a fast ride.' He was standing right beside me and only I could hear him.

'What happened?'

'Nothing. Dad called. He argued with Mum for two hours. Why did they separate? They can't live without screaming their guts out at each other.'

'It's OK, man. Not your problem,' I said.

Vroom's dad was a businessman who parted from his wife two years ago. He preferred his secretary to being with his family, so Vroom and his mother now lived without him.

'I couldn't sleep at all. Just lay in bed all day and now I feel sick. I need to get some energy back,' Vroom said as he straddled his bike.

'But it's freezing . . .' I began.

'What's going on, Shyam sahib?' the driver asked. I turned round. The driver looked at me with a puzzled expression and I shrugged my shoulders.

'He's going on his bike,' I told everyone.

'Come with me,' Vroom said to me. 'I'll get us there in half the time.'

'No, thanks,' I said, and folded my hands. I wasn't leaving the cosy Qualis to get on a bike.

Vroom bent over to greet the driver. 'Hello, driver sahib,' he said.

'Vroom sahib, don't you like my Qualis?' the driver said.

'No, Driver *ji*, I'm in the mood for riding my motorbike,' Vroom said.

'Hey, Vroom. Any news on Connexions? Anything happening?' Radhika asked, adjusting her hair.

Apart from the dark circles around her eyes, you could say Radhika was pretty. She has high cheekbones and her fair skin goes well with her wispy eyebrows and soot-black eyes. She wore a plain mustard sari, as saris were all she was allowed to wear in her in-laws'

house. It was different apparel from the jeans and skirts Radhika preferred before her marriage.

'No updates. Will dig for stuff today, but I think Bakshi will screw us all. Hey, Shyam, the website manual is all done by the way. I emailed it to the office,' Vroom said and started his bike.

'Cool, finally. Let's send it in today,' I said, perking up.

We left Vroom and moved to our last pick-up at Priyanka's place. It was 9.30 p.m., still an hour away from our shift. However, I was worried as Shefali finished her shift and left by 10.20.

Fortunately, Priyanka was at her pick-up point when we reached her place.

'Hi,' Priyanka said as she sat next to Esha in the middle row of seats. She carried a large, white plastic bag as well as her usual giant handbag.

'Hi,' everyone replied except me.

'I said hi, Shyam,' Priyanka said.

I pretended not to hear. Ever since we broke up, I've found it difficult to talk to her, even though I must think about her thirty times a day. I looked at her. She adjusted her dupatta round her neck. The forest-green salwar kameez she was wearing was new, I noticed. The colours suited her light brown skin. I looked at her nose and the nostrils that flared up every time she was upset. I swear tiny flames appeared in them when she got angry.

'Shyam, I said hi,' she said again.

'Hi,' I said.

'Where's Vroom?' Priyanka said.

'Vroom is riding . . . vroom,' Esha said, making a motorbike noise.

'Nice perfume, Esha. Shopping again, eh?' Priyanka said and sniffed.

'Escape, Calvin Klein,' Esha announced and struck a pose.

'Wow! Someone is going designer,' Priyanka said and both of them laughed. This is something I will never understand about her. Priyanka has bitched fifty times about Esha to me, yet when they are together they behave like long-lost sisters.

'Esha, big date coming?' Radhika said.

'No dates. I'm still so single. Suitable guys are an endangered species,' Esha said and all the girls laughed.

It wasn't that funny if you ask me. I wished Vroom was in the Qualis too. He was the only person in my team I could claim as a friend. At twenty-two he was four years younger than me but I still

found it easiest to talk to him. Radhika's household talk was too alien for me, Esha's modelling trip was also beyond me and Priyanka had been a lot more than a friend until recently. Four months ago, we broke up (Priyanka's version) or she dumped me (my version). So I was trying to do what she wanted us to do—'move on'—which was why I hung out with Shefali.

Two pairs of loud beeps from my shirt pocket startled everyone.

'Who's that?' Priyanka said.

'It's my text,' I said and opened the new message.

Where r u my eddy teddy? Come soon—curly wurly

It was Shefali. She was into cheesy nicknames. I replied to the text:

Qualis stuck in traffic. Will b there soon

'Who's that?' Esha asked me. 'Shefali?'

'No,' I said and everybody looked at me.

'Yes, it is. It's Shefali, isn't it?' Esha and Radhika said together and laughed.

'Why does Shefali always babytalk?' I heard Esha whisper to Radhika. More titters followed.

'Whatever,' I said and looked at my watch. The Qualis was still on the NH8 road. We were ten minutes away from Connexions.

Cool, I'll meet Shefali by 10.10, I thought.

'Can we stop for a quick tea at Inderjeet? We'll still make it by ten thirty,' Priyanka said.

Inderjeet dhaba on NH8 was famous among truck drivers for its all-night tea and snacks.

'Won't we be late?' Radhika crinkled her forehead.

'Of course not. Driver *ji* saved us twenty minutes in the last stretch. Come, Driver *ji*, my treat,' Priyanka said.

'Good idea. It will keep me awake,' Esha said.

The driver slowed the Qualis and parked near the Inderjeet dhaba counter.

'Hey, guys, do we have to stop? We're going to be late,' I protested.

'We won't be late. Let's treat Driver *ji* for getting us here so fast,' Priyanka said and got out of the Qualis.

'He wants to be with Shefali, dude,' Esha elbowed Radhika. They guffawed again. What's so damn funny? I wanted to ask.

'No, I just like to reach my shift a few minutes early,' I said and got out of the Qualis. Military Uncle and the driver followed us.

The driver arranged plastic chairs for us. Inderjeet's minions collected tea orders. The tea arrived in three minutes.

'So what's the gossip?' Priyanka said, cupping her hands round the glass.

'No gossip. You tell us what's happening in *your* life,' Radhika said.

'I actually do have something to tell,' Priyanka said with a sly smile.

'What?' Radhika and Esha exclaimed together.

'I'll tell you when we get to the bay. It's big,' Priyanka said.

'Tell us now,' Esha said, poking Priyanka's shoulder.

'There's no time. Someone is in a desperate hurry,' Priyanka said, glancing meaningfully at me.

I turned away.

'OK, I have something to share too. But don't tell anyone,' Esha said.

'What?' Radhika said.

'See,' Esha said and stood up. She raised her top to expose a flat midriff, on which there was a newborn ring.

'Cool, check it out,' Priyanka said, 'someone's turning hip.'

Military Uncle stared as if in a state of shock. I suspect he was never young and was just born a straight forty-year-old.

'Did it hurt?' Radhika said.

'Oh yes,' Esha said. 'Imagine someone stapling your tummy hard.'

Esha's statement churned my stomach.

'Shall we go?' I said, gulping down my tea.

'Let's go, girls, or Mr Conscientious will get upset.' Priyanka suppressed a smirk. I hated her.

I went to the counter to pay the bill. Vroom was watching TV.

'Hi. What are you guys doing here?' he said.

I told him about the girls' tea idea.

'I arrived twenty minutes ago, man,' Vroom said. He extinguished his cigarette and showed me the butt. 'This was my first.'

Vroom was trying to cut down to four cigarettes a night. However, with Bakshi in our life, it was impossible.

'Can you rush me to the call centre? Shefali will be leaving soon,' I said.

'Shefali. Oh, you mean Curly Wurly.' Vroom laughed.

'Shut up, man. She has to catch the Qualis after her shift. This is the only time I get with her.'

'Once you had Priyanka, and now you sink to Shefali levels,' Vroom said, and bent his elbow to rest his six-foot-two-inch frame on the dhaba counter.

'What's wrong with Shefali?' I said, shuffling from one foot to the other.

'Nothing. It's just that it's nice to have a girlfriend with half a brain. Why are you wasting your time with her?'

'I'm weaning myself off Priyanka. I'm trying to move on,' I said.

'What happened to the re-proposal plan with Priyanka?' Vroom said.

'I've told you, not until I become team leader. Which should be soon—maybe tonight after we submit the website manual. Now can we please go?'

'Yeah, right. Some hopes you live on,' Vroom said, but moved away from the counter.

I held on tight as he zipped through NH8 at 120 kilometres an hour. I closed my eyes and prayed Shefali wouldn't be angry, and that I would get there alive.

I jumped off the bike as Vroom reached the call centre. The bike jerked forward and Vroom had to use both his legs to balance.

'Easy, man,' Vroom said in an irritated voice. 'Can you just let me park?'

'Sorry. I'm really late,' I said and ran inside.

10.18 p.m.

'I'm not talking to you,' Shefali said and started playing with one of her large silver earrings.

'Sorry, Shefali. My bay people held me up.' I stood next to her, leaning against her desk. She sat on her swivel chair and rotated it ninety degrees away from me to showcase her sulking. The dozens of work stations in her bay were empty as all the other agents had left.

'Whatever. I thought you were their team leader,' she said.

'I am not the team leader. I will be soon, but I'm not one yet,' I said.

'Why don't they make you team leader?' She fluttered her eyelashes.

'I don't know. Bakshi said he's trying, but I have to bring my leadership skills up to speed.'

'So you guys don't have a team leader.'

'No. Bakshi says we have to manage without one. I help with supervisory stuff for now. But Bakshi told me I have strong future potential.'

'Eddy Teddy?' Shefali said. I looked at her. If she stopped wearing Hello Kitty hairpins, she could be passably cute. 'Did you like my gift?'

'What gift?'

'The ringtones. I gave you six ringtones. See, you don't even remember.'

'I do. See, I put "Last Christmas" as my tone,' I said and picked up my phone to play it.

'So cute,' Shefali said. 'So cute it sounds, my Eddy Teddy.'

'Shefali, can you stop calling me that? Just call me Shyam.'

'Don't you like the name I gave you?' she said, her voice transcending from sad to tragic.

I kept quiet. You never tell women you don't like something they have done. However, they pick up on the silence.

'You can choose another name if you want. I'm not like your other girlfriends,' she said, tears appearing in her eyes. I looked at my watch. Three more minutes and time would heal everything, I thought. I took a deep breath.

'What kind of girlfriends?' I said.

'Like,' she sniffled, 'bossy girls who impose their way on you.'

'Who? What are you implying?' I said, my voice getting firmer. It was true; Priyanka could be bossy, but only if you didn't listen to her.

'Forget it. But will you give me a name if I stop crying?'

'Yes,' I said. I'd rename the rest of her family if she stopped this drama.

'OK,' she said and became normal. 'Give me a name.'

I thought hard. 'Sheffy? How about Sheffy?' I said finally.

'Nooo. I want something cuuuter,' she said. Shefali loves to drag out words.

'I can't think of anything cute right now. I have to work. Isn't your Qualis leaving soon, too?' I said.

She looked at her watch and stood up.

'Yes, I'd better leave now. Will you think of a name by tomorrow?'

'I will, bye now.' I pecked her on the cheek and turned to go back to my bay.

'Bye bye, Eddy Teddy,' her voice followed me.

10.27 p.m.

The others were already at the desk when I got back from Shefali's bay.

Our bay's name is the Western Appliances Strategic Group or WASG. Unlike the other bay that troubleshoots for computer customers, we deal with customers of home appliances such as refrigerators, ovens and vacuum cleaners. We are called the strategic bay because we specialise in troublesome customers. These 'strategic' customers call a lot and are too stupid to figure things out—actually the latter applies to a lot of callers.

We feel special, as we aren't part of the main computers bay. The main bay has over a thousand agents and handles the huge Western Computers account. While the calls are less weird there, they miss the privacy we enjoy in WASG.

I took my seat at the long rectangular table. We have a fixed seating arrangement: I sit next to Vroom, while Priyanka is opposite me; Esha is adjacent to Priyanka and Radhika sits next to Esha. The bay is open plan so we can all see each other, and Military Uncle's chat station is in the corner of the room. At each of the other three corners there are, respectively, the rest rooms, a conference room and a stationery supplies room.

However, no one apart from Uncle was at their seat when I sat down. Everyone had gathered around Priyanka.

'What's the news? Tell us now,' Esha was saying.

'OK, OK. But on one condition. It doesn't leave WASG,' Priyanka said, sitting down. She pulled out a large plastic bag from under her seat.

'Guys,' I said, interrupting their banter.

Everyone turned to look at me. I pointed at the desk and the unmanned phones. I looked at my watch. It was 10.29 p.m. The call system routine back-up was about to finish and our calls would begin in one minute.

Everyone returned to their chairs and put on their headsets.

Calls began at 10.31 p.m. Numbers started flashing on our common switchboard as we picked up calls one after the other.

'Good afternoon, Western Appliances, Victor speaking, how may I help you?' Vroom said.

'Yes, according to my records I am speaking to Ms Smith, and you have the WAF200 dishwasher. Is that right?' Esha said.

Esha's memory impressed the caller. It was not a big deal, given that our automated system showed every caller's records. We also had details on when they'd last called us. In fact, the reason why her call had come to our desk—the Western Appliances Strategic desk—was because she was a persistent caller. This way the main bay could continue to run smoothly.

Sometimes we had customers that were oddballs even by WASG standards. I won't go into all of them, but Vroom's 10.37 p.m. call went something like this:

'Yes, Ms Paulson, of course we remember you. Happy Thanksgiving, I hope you're roasting a big turkey in our WA100 model oven,' Vroom said, reading from a script that reminded us about the American festival of the day.

I couldn't hear the customer's side of the conversation, but Ms Paulson was obviously explaining her problem with the oven.

'No, Ms Paulson, you shouldn't have unscrewed the cover,' Vroom said, as politely as possible.'

Ms Paulson spoke for another minute. Our strategic bay hardly had a reputation for efficiency, but long calls like these could screw up Vroom's response times.

'No, really madam. An electrical appliance like the WA100 should only be serviced by trained professionals. So tell me . . . yes . . . oh really?' Vroom continued, taking deep breaths. Patience did not come naturally to him.

Radhika was helping someone defrost her fridge; Esha was assisting a customer in unpacking a dishwasher. Everyone was speaking with an American accent and sounded different from the way they normally spoke. I took a break from the calls to compile the call statistics of the previous day. I didn't particularly like doing this, but Bakshi had left me little choice.

'You see, madam,' Vroom was still with Ms Paulson, 'I understand your turkey didn't fit and you didn't want to cut it, but you should not have opened up the equipment . . . I suggest you take the oven to your dealer,' Vroom said firmly. 'And next time, get a smaller turkey . . . and yes, a ready-made turkey would be a good idea for tonight . . . No, I don't have a dial-a-turkey number. Thank you for calling, Ms Paulson, bye.' Vroom ended the call. He banged his fist on the table.

'Everything OK?' I said, not looking up from my papers.

'Yeah. Just a psycho customer,' he mumbled.

I worked on my computer for the next ten minutes, compiling the call statistics. Bakshi had also assigned me the responsibility of checking the other agents' etiquette. Every now and then I would listen in on somebody's call. At 10.47 p.m. I connected to Esha's line.

'Yes, sir. I sound like your daughter? Oh, thank you. So what is wrong with the vacuum cleaner?' she was saying.

Esha's tone was perfect—just the right mix of politeness and firmness. Management monitored us on average call-handling times, or AHTs. As WASG got the trickier customers, our AHT benchmarks were higher at two and a half minutes per call.

'Beep!' The sound of the fax machine made me look up. I went to the machine and checked the incoming fax. It was from Bakshi.

The fax machine took three minutes to churn out the seven pages he had sent. I tore the message sheet off the machine and held the first sheet up.

From: Subhash Bakshi
Subject: Training Initiatives

Dear Shyam,
Just FYI, I have recommended your name to assist in accent training as they are short of teachers. I am sure you can spare some time for this. As always, I am trying to get you more relevant and strategic exposure.
Yours,
Subhash Bakshi
Manager, Connexions

I read the rest of the fax and gasped. Bakshi was sucking me into several hours outside my shift to teach new recruits.

'What's up?' Vroom said, coming up to me.

I passed the fax to Vroom. He read it and smirked.

'I hate accent training,' I said. 'You can't teach Delhi people to speak like Americans in a week.'

'Just as you can't train Americans to speak with a Punjabi accent,' Vroom said and chuckled. 'Anyway, go train-train, leave your brain.'

'What will I do?' I said, beginning to walk back towards our desk.

'Go train-train, leave your brain,' Vroom said and laughed. He liked the rhyme, and repeated it several times as we walked back to the bay.

Back at my seat, Vroom's words—'train-train'—echoed in my head, bringing back memories of the National Rail Museum, where I had a date with Priyanka a year ago.

My Past Dates with Priyanka—I
National Rail Museum, Chanakyapuri: One year earlier

She arrived thirty minutes late. I had been round the whole museum twice. I went to the museum canteen and was cradling a lukewarm Coke when she finally arrived.

'OK. Don't say anything. Sorry, I'm late, I know,' she said and sat down.

I didn't say anything. I looked at her tiny nose. I wondered how it allowed in enough oxygen.

'What? Say something,' she said after five seconds.

'I thought you told me to be quiet,' I said.

'My mother needs professional help,' Priyanka said.

'What happened? What was the fuel today?'

'We don't need fuel, just a spark is enough. Just as I was ready to leave to come here, she made a comment on my dress.'

'What did she say?' I asked, looking at her clothes. She wore a blue tie-dye skirt, and a T-shirt with a peace sign on it. It was typical Priyanka stuff. She wore earrings with blue beads, which matched her necklace, and she had a hint of kohl round her eyes, which I was crazy about.

'I was almost at the door when she said, "Why don't you wear the gold necklace I gave you for your last birthday?"' Priyanka said.

'And then?' She obviously wasn't wearing a gold necklace as my gaze turned to the hollow of her neck, which I felt like touching.

'And I was like, no, Mum, it won't go with my dress. Yellow metal is totally uncool, only aunties wear it. Boom, next thing we are having this big, long argument. That's what made me late. Sorry,' she said.

'You didn't have to argue. Just wear the chain in front of her and take it off later,' I said as the waiter came to take our order.

'But that's not the point. Anyway,' she said and turned to the waiter, 'get me a plate of samosas. Actually, wait, they are too fattening. I'll have popcorn. Popcorn is lighter, right?' She looked at the waiter as if he was a nutritionist.

'She'll have popcorn,' I said to the waiter.

'So, what else is happening? Have you met up with Vroom?' she said.

'I was supposed to, but he couldn't come. He had a date.'

'With who? A new girl?'

'Of course. He never sticks to one,' I said.

'I can't understand the deal with Vroom. He is the most materialistic and unemotional person I have met in my entire life,' Priyanka said.

'No he isn't,' I said, as the popcorn arrived at our table.

'Well, look at him, jeans, phones, pizzas and bikes. That's all he lives for. And this whole new-girlfriend-every-three-months thing, come on, at some point you've got to stop that, right?'

'Well, *I'm* happy to stick to the one I have,' I said.

'You are so cute,' Priyanka said. She blushed and smiled.

'Vroom has changed,' I said. 'He wasn't like this when he first joined from his previous job.'

'The one at the newspaper?'

'Yeah, journalist trainee. He started in current affairs. Do you know what one of his famous pieces was called?'

'No, what? Oh crap,' Priyanka said, looking at someone behind me.

'What happened?'

'Nothing, just don't look back. Some relatives of mine are here with their kids. Oh no,' she said, looking down at our table.

Now when someone tells you not to look at something, you always feel an incredible urge to do just that. From the corner of my eye I saw a family with two kids in the corner of the room.

'Who else do you expect to come here but kids?' I said.

'Shut up and look down. Anyway, tell me about Vroom's piece,' she said.

'Oh yeah. It was called "Why Don't Politicians Ever Commit Suicide?" The article said all kinds of people—students, housewives, businessmen, employees and even film stars—commit suicide. But politicians never do. That tells you something.'

'What?' she said, still keeping her eyes down.

'Well, his point was that suicide is a horrible thing and people do it only because they are really hurt. This means they feel something, but politicians don't. So, basically, this country is run by people who don't feel anything.'

'Wow! Can't imagine that going down well with his editor.'

'You bet it didn't. However, Vroom had sneaked it in. The editor only saw it after it was printed and all hell broke loose. Vroom somehow saved his job, but his bosses moved him to cover the society page, page three. They told him he was good-looking so he would fit in. In addition, he'd done a photography course and could take the pictures himself.'

'Cover page three as you're good-looking? That's ridiculous.'

'It is ridiculous. But Vroom took his revenge. He took unflattering pictures of the glitterati—faces stuffed with food, close-ups of cellulite on thighs, drunk people throwing up—all showed up in the papers the next day.'

'Oh my god.' Priyanka laughed. 'He sounds like an activist. I can't understand his switching to the call centre for money.'

'Well, according to him, there is activism in chasing money too.'

'And how does that work?'

'Well, his point is that the only reason Americans have a say in th world is because they have cash. So, the first thing we have to do earn money.'

'Interesting,' Priyanka said and let out a sigh. 'Well, that is why w slog at night. I could have done my B.Ed. right after college, but wanted to save some money first. I can't open my dream nurser school without cash. So until then, it's two hundred calls a nigh night after night.' Priyanka rested her elbows on the table and leane her chin on her hands. I looked at her. I think she would make th cutest nursery-school principal ever.

'Priyanka dideeee.' The five-year-old boy running toward Priyanka had a model train set and a glass of Coke precariousl balanced in his hands. He tripped near our table and I lunged to sav him. I succeeded, but his Coke went all over my shirt.

'Oh no,' I said even as I saw a three-year-old girl with a hug lollipop in her mouth running towards us. I moved aside from th tornado to save another collision. She landed straight on Priyanka lap. I went to the rest room to clean my shirt.

'Shyam,' Priyanka said when I returned, 'meet my cousin, D Anurag.' The entire family had shifted to our table. Priyanka intrc duced me to everyone. Priyanka told her doctor cousin I worked at call centre and I think he was less interested in talking to me afte that. The kids ate half the popcorn and spilt the rest of it. The boy wa running his model train set through popcorn fields on the table an screaming a mock siren with his sister.

'Sit, Shyam,' Priyanka said.

'No, actually I have an early shift today,' I said.

'But wait—' Priyanka said.

'No, I have to go,' I said and ran out of the museum.

10.50 p.m.

'Ouch!' Esha's scream during her call broke my train of reminiscence

'What?' I said. I could hear loud static.

'It's a really bad line . . . Hello, yes, madam,' Esha said.

'Freaking hell,' Vroom said as he pulled off his headset.

'What's going on?' I said.

'There's shrill static coming every few seconds now. Ask Bakshi t send someone,' Vroom said, rubbing his ears.

'I'll go to his office. You guys cover the calls,' I said and looked a the time. It was 10.51 p.m. The first break was in less than an hour.

BAKSHI WAS IN HIS OVERSIZED office, staring at his computer with his mouth open. As I came in, he rapidly closed the windows. He was probably surfing the Internet for bikini babes or something.

'Good evening, sir,' I said.

'Oh hello, Sam. Please come in.' Bakshi liked to call us by our Western names.

I walked into his office slowly, to give him time to close his favourite websites.

'Come, come, Sam, don't worry. I believe in being an open-door manager,' Bakshi said.

I looked at his big square face, which was unusually large for his five-foot-six-inch body. His face shone as usual. It was the first thing you noticed about Bakshi—the oil fields on his face. If you could immerse Bakshi's skin in our landscape, you'd solve India's oil problems for ever.

Bakshi was about thirty but looked forty and behaved as if he was fifty. He had worked in Connexions for three years. Before that, he did an MBA in some university in south India. He loved to talk in manager's language or 'Managese', which is another language like English and American.

'So, how are the resources doing?' Bakshi said, swivelling on his chair. He never referred to us as people; we were all 'resources'.

'Fine, sir. I wanted to discuss a problem. The phone lines aren't working properly—there's a lot of static during calls. Can you ask Systems . . .'

'Sam,' Bakshi said, pointing a pen at me. 'What did I tell you about how to approach problems?'

I thought hard, but nothing came to mind.

'I don't remember, sir—Solve them?'

'No. I said "big picture". Always start with the big picture.'

I was puzzled. What was the big picture here? There was static coming through the phones and we had to ask Systems to fix it. I could have called them myself, but Bakshi's intervention would get a faster response.

'Sir, it is a specific issue. Customers are hearing disturbance . . .'

'Sam,' Bakshi signalled me to sit down, 'what makes a good manager?'

'What?' I sat down and surreptitiously looked at my watch. It was 10.57 p.m. I hoped the call flow was moderate so the others wouldn't have a tough time when they were one down on the desk.

'Big picture,' Bakshi said. 'Focus on the big picture. Learn to identify the strategic variables, Sam.' Before I could speak, he had pulled out his pen and was drawing a diagram of a box divided into four squares.

'Maybe I can explain this to you with the help of a two-by-two matrix,' he said and bent down to write 'High' and 'Low' along the boxes.

'Sir, please,' I said, placing both my hands down to cover the sheet.

'What?' he said with irritation.

'Sir, this is really interesting, but right now my team is waiting.'

'So?' Bakshi said.

'The phones, sir. Please tell Systems they should check the WASG bay urgently,' I said, without pausing to breathe.

'Huh?' Bakshi said.

'Just call Systems, sir,' I said and stood up, 'using that.' I pointed at his telephone and rushed back to my bay.

11.00 p.m.

'Nice break, eh?' Vroom said when I returned to our bay.

'C'mon, man, I just went to Bakshi's office about the static,' I said.

'Is he sending someone?' Vroom asked as he untangled his phone wires.

'He said I should identify the strategic variables first,' I said and sat down on my seat, resting my face on my hands.

'Strategic variables? What are they?' Vroom said, without looking at me.

'How the hell do I know?' I snorted. 'If I did, I'd be team leader. He also drew a diagram.'

Radhika, Esha and Priyanka were busy on calls. Every few seconds, they would turn the phone away from their ears to avoid the loud static. I wished the Systems guy would come by soon.

'What diagram?' Vroom said as he took out some chewing gum from his drawer and offered one to me.

'Some two-by-two matrix or something,' I said, declining his offer.

'Poor Bakshi, he's just a silly, harmless creature. Don't worry about him,' Vroom said.

'Where the hell is the Systems guy?' I called Systems myself. They hadn't yet received a call from Bakshi. 'Can you please come now . . . yes, we have an emergency . . . yes, our manager knows about it.'

'Things are bad around here,' Vroom said. 'Bad news may be coming.'

'What do you mean? Are they cutting jobs?' I asked, now a little worried and anxious as well as frustrated. It's amazing how all these nasty emotions decide to visit me together.

'I'm trying to find out,' Vroom said, clicking open a window on his screen. 'The Western Computers account is really suffering. If we lose that account, the call centre will sink.'

A visitor in our bay interrupted us. I knew he was the Systems guy as he had three pagers on his belt and two memory cards hanging round his neck.

Priyanka told him about the problem and made him listen to the static.

The Systems guy asked us to disconnect our lines for ten minutes.

Everyone removed their headsets. I saw Esha adjusting her hair. She does it at least ten times a night. Radhika took some pink wool out from her bag and started to knit. Military Uncle's system was still working, so he stayed glued to his monitor.

'What are you knitting?' Esha turned to Radhika.

'A scarf for my mother-in-law. She's very sweet, she feels cold at night.'

'She is not sweet—' Vroom began to say but Radhika interrupted him.

'Shh, Vroom. She is fine, just traditional.'

'And that sucks, right?' Vroom said.

'Not at all. In fact, I like the cosy family feeling. They're only a little bit old-fashioned,' Radhika said and smiled. I didn't think her smile was genuine, but it was none of my business.

'Yeah, right. Only a little. As in always-cover-your-head-with-your-sari types,' Vroom said.

'They make you cover your head?' Esha asked.

'They don't *make* me do anything, Esha. I am willing to follow their culture. All married women in their house do it,' Radhika said.

'Still, it is a bit weird,' Esha said doubtfully.

'Anyway, I look on it as a challenge. I love Anuj and he said he came as a package. But yeah, sometimes I miss wearing low-waisted jeans like you wore yesterday.'

I was amazed Radhika remembered what Esha had worn yesterday.

'You like those jeans?' Esha said, her eyes lighting up.

'I love them. But I guess you need the right figure for them,'

Radhika said. 'Anyway, sorry to change the topic, but we're forgetting something.'

'What? Systems?' I asked, as I looked under the table where the Systems guy lurked within a jungle of tangled wires. He told me he'd need ten minutes.

'I didn't mean the static,' Radhika said as she put her knitting aside. 'Miss Priyanka has some big news for us, remember?'

'Oh yes. C'mon, Priyanka, tell us!' Esha screamed. Military Uncle looked up from his screen for a second and then went back to work.

'OK, I do have something to tell you,' Priyanka said with a sheepish grin. She brought out a box of sweets from her large plastic bag and started to carefully open the red cellophane wrapping on the box. I hate it when she's so methodical. Just rip the damn wrapping off, I thought.

'So, what's up? Ooh, milk cake, my favourite,' Radhika said, as Vroom jumped to grab the first piece.

'I'll tell you, but you guys have to swear it won't leave WASG,' Priyanka said. She offered the box to Radhika and Esha. Radhika took two pieces, while Esha broke off the tiniest piece possible with human fingers. I guess the low-cut-jeans figure comes at a price.

'Of course we won't tell anyone. Now tell us, please,' Esha said and wiped her long fingers with a tissue.

'Well, you know my mum and her obsession for a match with an expat Indian for her rebellious daughter to take her away from India?'

'Uh-uh,' Radhika nodded as she ate her milk cake.

'So these family friends of ours brought a proposal for me. It came from one of their relatives in Seattle. I would have said no as I always do. But this time I saw the photos, which were cute. I spoke to the guy on the phone and he sounded decent. He works at Microsoft and his parents are in Delhi and I met them today. They are nice people,' Priyanka said.

'And,' Esha said, her eyes opening wide and staring at Priyanka.

'I don't know, something just clicked,' Priyanka said. 'They asked for my decision up-front and I said . . . yes.'

'Waaaoooow! Oh wow!' the girls screamed at the highest pitch possible. The Systems guy trembled under the table. I told him everything was fine and asked him to continue. At least everything was fine outside. Inside I had a burning feeling, as if someone had tossed a hot coal in my stomach.

Radhika and Esha got up to hug Priyanka as if India had won the World Cup or something. People get married every day. Did these girls really have to create a scene? I looked at my computer screen and saw that Microsoft Word was open. Angrily I closed all windows with the Microsoft logo on it.

'Congratulations, Priyanka,' Vroom said, 'that's big news.'

Even Military Uncle got up and came to shake hands with Priyanka. His generation like it when young people decide to get married. Of course, he was back at his desk within twenty seconds.

'You've met the guy?' Vroom asked.

'No, he's in Seattle. But we spoke for hours on the phone, and I've seen his picture. He's cute. Do you want to see the photo?' Priyanka said.

'No, thanks,' I blurted out. Damn, I couldn't believe I'd said that. By sheer luck I hadn't said it loud enough for Priyanka to hear.

'Do you want some cake?' Priyanka asked, shunting the box towards me.

'No, thanks,' I said and slid the box back.

'I thought milk cake was your favourite.'

'Not any more. My tastes have changed,' I said. 'And I'm trying to cut down.'

'Not even a small piece?' she asked and tilted her head. At one stage in my life I used to find that head-tilt cute, but today I remained adamant.

I shook my head and our eyes locked. When you've shared a relationship with someone, the first change is in how you look into each other's eyes. The gaze becomes more fixed and it's hard to pull away from it.

'Aren't you going to say anything?' Priyanka said. When girls say that, it's not really a question. It means they *want* you to say something.

'About what? The phone lines? They'll be fixed in ten minutes,' I said.

'Not that. I'm getting married, Shyam.'

'Good,' I said and turned to my screen.

'Show us the picture!' Esha screamed, as if it was Brad Pitt naked or something. Priyanka took out a photograph from her handbag and passed it round. I saw it from a distance: he looked like a regular software geek. He stood straight with his stomach pulled in—an old trick any guy with a paunch applies when he gets his picture taken. He wore glasses and had a super-neat hairstyle as if his mum combed his hair every morning. He was standing with the Statue of Liberty in the

background and his forced smile made him look like a total loser, if you asked me. However, now he was hot, and girls with dimples were ready to marry him without even meeting him.

'He's so cute, like a teddy bear,' Esha said, passing the picture to Radhika.

When girls call a guy 'teddy bear', they just mean he's a nice guy but they'd never be attracted to him. Girls may say they like such guys, but teddy bears never get to sleep with anyone. Unless of course their mums hunt the neighbourhood for them.

'Are you OK?' Priyanka said to me. The others were analysing the picture.

'Yeah. Why?'

'I just expected a little more reaction. We've known each other for four years, more than anybody else on the desk.'

Radhika, Esha and Vroom turned to look at us.

'Reaction?' I said.'I thought I said *good.*'

'That's all?' Priyanka said. Her smile had left the building.

Everyone was staring at me.

'OK,' I said, 'OK, Priyanka. This is *great* news. I am *so* happy for you. *OK?*'

'You could have used a better tone,' Priyanka muttered, and walked away quickly towards the ladies' room.

'What? Why is everyone staring at me?' I said as they all turned away.

The Systems guy finally came out from under the table.

'Fixed?' I said.

'I need signal-testing equipment,' he said, wiping sweat off his forehead. 'The problem could be external. Builders are digging all over this suburb right now, some contractor may have dug over our lines. Just take a break until I come back. Get your manager here as well,' he said and left.

I called Bakshi, but the line was busy so I left a voicemail.

Priyanka returned from the rest room and I noticed that she had washed her face. Her nose still had a drop of water on it.

'Sounds like an easy night. I hope it never gets fixed,' Radhika said.

'There's nothing better than a call-centre job when the phones aren't working,' Priyanka said and closed the box of sweets.

'So, tell us more. What's he like?' Esha said.

'Who? Ganesh?' Priyanka asked.

'His name is Ganesh? Nice,' Esha said and switched on her mobile phone. Normally agents couldn't use cellphones in the bay, but it was OK to do so when the system was down.

'Does Ganesh like to talk? Sometimes the software types are really quiet,' Radhika said.

'Oh yes, he talks a lot. In fact, I might get a call from him tonight,' Priyanka said and smiled.

'You sound *sooo* happy,' Esha said. Her 'so' lasted four seconds.

'I *am* happy. I can see what Radhika says now about getting a new family. Ganesh's mum came round today and gave me a big gold chain and hugged me and kissed me.'

'Sounds horrible,' Vroom said.

'Shut up, Vroom,' Esha said. 'Oh, Priyanka, you're so lucky.'

Vroom sensed that I wasn't exactly jumping with joy at the conversation.

'Cigarette?' he said.

I looked at my watch. It was 11.30, our usual time for taking a smoke. In any case, I preferred burning my lungs to sticking around to find out Ganesh's hobbies.

11.31 p.m.

Vroom and I went to the call-centre parking lot. He leaned against his bike and lit two cigarettes with one match. I looked at his tall, thin frame. If he weren't so skinny you'd say he was a stud. Still, a cigarette looked out of place on his boyish face. Perhaps conscious of the people who had called him Baby Face before, he always wore one-day-old stubble. He passed a lit cigarette to me. I took a puff and let it out in the cold night air.

We stayed quiet for a moment and I was thankful to Vroom for that. One thing guys do know is when to shut up.

Vroom finally spoke, starting with a neutral topic. 'I need a break. Good thing I'm going to Manali next weekend.'

'Cool, Manali is really nice,' I said.

'I'm going with my school buddies. We might ride up there on bikes. Have you been there?'

'Last year. We went by bus, though,' I said.

'Who did you go with?' Vroom said.

'Priyanka,' I said. 'It was great. We took a bus at four in the morning. Priyanka was in her anti-snob phase, so she insisted we take the ordinary slow bus and not the deluxe fast one. She wanted to enjoy the scenery slowly.'

'And then?'

'The moment the bus reached the highway, she leaned on my shoulder and fell asleep. My shoulder cramped, but apart from that it was great fun.'

'She's a silly girl,' Vroom said, letting out a big puff, his face smiling behind the smoke ring.

'She is. You should have seen her back then. She used to wear all these beads and earthy clothes she bought from Fabindia all the time. And then she'd sit with the truck drivers and drink tea.'

'Wow. I can't imagine Priyanka like that now,' Vroom said.

'Trust me, the girl has a wild side,' I said, and paused as her face came to mind. 'Anyway, it's history now. Girls change.'

'You bet. She's all set now.'

I nodded. I didn't want to talk about Priyanka any more. At least one part of me didn't. The rest of me always wanted to talk about her.

'An expat Indian catch, Microsoft and all. Not bad,' Vroom continued as he lit another cigarette. I narrowed my eyes at him.

'It's a little too fast, isn't it?' I said. 'Don't you think she's moving too quickly?'

'C'mon, man, you don't get matches like that every day. He's in freakin' Microsoft. As good as they get. He is MS Groom 1.1—deluxe edition.'

'What's the deal with Microsoft?'

'Dude, I'm sure he packs close to a hundred grand a year.'

'What? A hundred thousand US dollars a year?'

Vroom nodded. I tried to convert one hundred thousand US dollars to rupees and divide it by twelve to get the monthly salary, but there were too many zeros and it was a tough calculation to do in my head.

'Stop calculating in rupees,' Vroom said and smiled. 'Priyanka's got a catch, I'm telling you.'

He paused and looked at me. His eyes were wet, brown and kind of like a puppy's. I could see why girls flocked to him. It was the eyes.

'I'm going to ask you a question. Will you answer it honestly?' he said.

'OK.'

'Are you upset she's getting married? I know you have feelings for her.'

'No,' I said and started laughing. 'I just find it a bit strange. But I wouldn't say I'm upset. That's too strong a word. It is not like we're together any more. No, I'm not *upset* upset.'

He waited while I continued to laugh exaggeratedly. When I'd stopped he said, 'OK, don't bullshit me. What happened to your re-proposal plans?'

I sighed. 'Well, of course I feel for her, but they're just vestigial feelings.'

'Vesti what?'

'Like vestigial organs. They serve no purpose or value. But they can give you a pain in the appendix. It's the same with my feelings for Priyanka. I'm supposed to have moved on, but obviously I haven't. Meanwhile, Mr Indian in Seattle comes and gives me a kick in the rear end,' I said.

'Talk to her. Don't tell me you're not going to,' Vroom said.

'I was planning to. I thought we'd submit the website user manual and that would make it easier for Boston to approve my promotion,' I said, referring to the company headquarters in America. 'How did I know there would be milk cake tonight? How was it? I didn't touch it.'

'The milk cake was great. Never sulk when food is at stake, dude. Anyway, listen, you still have some time. She's only just said yes.'

'I hope so. Though it's hard to compete with Mr Microsoft,' I said.

We remained silent for a few more seconds. Vroom spoke again.

'Yeah, man. Girls are strategic. They talk about love and romance but when it comes to doing the deal, they'll choose the fattest chicken,' he said.

'I guess I can only become fat, not a fat chicken,' I said.

'Yeah, you need to be fat, fresh and fluffy. That's why you shouldn't feel so upset. We're not good husband material, just accept it.'

'Thanks, Vroom, that really makes my day,' I said. I did agree with him though. It was evolution. Maybe nature wanted dimple-cheeked, software-geek, mini-Ganesh babies. They were of far more value to society than depressed, good-for-nothing junior Shyams.

'And anyway, it's the girl who always gets to choose. Men propose and women accept or, as in many cases, reject it.'

It's true. Girls go around rejecting men like it's their birthright. They have no idea how much it hurts us.

'But who knows?' Vroom said. 'Priyanka isn't like other girls, or maybe she is after all. Either way, don't give up, man. Try to get her back.'

'Speaking of getting her back, shouldn't we be heading back to the bay?' I said and looked at my watch. 'It's eleven forty-five p.m.'

AS WE RETURNED FROM the parking lot, we passed the Western Computers main bay. The main bay sounded like a noisy school, except the kids weren't talking to one another, but to customers. Monitoring problems, viruses, strange error messages—there was nothing Connexions could not help you with.

'Still looks busy,' I said.

'Not at all. People have told me call traffic is down forty per cent. I think they'll cut a lot of staff or, worst-case scenario, cut everyone, close this poorly managed madhouse down and shift the clients to the centre based in Bangalore,' Vroom said. Bangalore was the location of the second Western Computers and Applicances call centre in India.

'Close down!' I echoed. 'Are you serious, what will happen to the hundreds of jobs here?'

'Like they care.' He shrugged his lanky shoulders. 'Shit happens in life. It could happen tonight,' Vroom said as we reached the WASG bay.

12.15 a.m.

The Systems guy was under the table again.

'No calls yet. They've asked for a senior engineer,' Priyanka said.

'It's an external fault. Some cables are damaged, I think. This area of Gurgaon is going nuts with all the building work,' the Systems guy said.

'Does Bakshi know?' I said.

'I don't know,' Priyanka said.

Vroom and I sat down at our desk.

'It's not too bad. Nice break,' Esha said as she filed her nails.

Priyanka's cellphone began to ring, startling everyone.

'Who's calling you so late?' Radhika said, still knitting her scarf.

'It's long distance, I think,' Priyanka said and smiled.

'Ooooh!' Esha squealed, like a two-year-old on a bouncy castle.

'Hi, Ganesh. I've just switched my phone on,' Priyanka said.

I couldn't hear Ganesh's response, thank god.

'Fifteen times? I can't believe you tried my number fifteen times . . . so sorry,' Priyanka said, looking idiotic with happiness.

'Yes, I'm at work. But it's really chaotic today. The systems are down . . . How come you're working on Thanksgiving? Oh, nice of the Indians to offer to work . . . Hello? . . . Hello?' Priyanka said.

'What happened?' Esha said.

'There's hardly any network,' Priyanka said, shaking her phone.

'We're in the basement. Nothing comes into this black hole,' Vroom said. He was surfing the Internet, and was on the Formula One website.

'Use the landline,' Esha said, pointing to the spare phone on our desk. Every team in Connexions had a spare independent landline at their desk for emergency use. 'Tell him to call on the landline.'

'Here?' Priyanka asked, looking to me for permission.

Normally this would be unthinkable, but our systems were down so it didn't really matter. Also, I didn't want to look like a sore loser, preventing a new couple from starting their romance.

I nodded and pretended to be absorbed by my computer screen. As the ad hoc team leader, I could approve personal calls and listen in on any line on the desk through my headset. However, I couldn't listen in on the independent emergency phone. Not unless I went under the table and tapped it.

Tap the landline, a faint voice echoed in my head.

'No, it's wrong,' I said. But I could still hear one side of the conversation.

'Hello . . . Ganesh, call the landline . . . yes, 22463463 and 11 for Delhi . . . Call after ten minutes, our boss might be doing his rounds soon . . . I know ten minutes is six hundred seconds, I'm sure you'll survive.' She laughed uncontrollably and hung up. When women laugh nonstop, they're flirting.

'He sounds so *cuuute*,' Esha said.

'I'm going to see Bakshi. We need to fix the systems,' I said and stood up. I couldn't bear 600-seconds-without-you survival stories.

I was walking towards Bakshi's office when I saw him coming towards me.

'Agent Sam, why aren't you at your desk?' Bakshi said.

'I was looking for you, sir,' I said.

'I'm all yours,' Bakshi said as his face broke into a smile.

Bakshi and I returned to WASG. Bakshi's heavy steps were plainly heard by everyone. Radhika hid her knitting under the table. Vroom opened his screen to an empty MS Word document.

The Systems guy came out from under the table and called his boss, the head of the IT department.

'Looks like we have technology issues here,' Bakshi said and the Systems guy nodded his head.

The head of IT arrived soon after and he and the Systems guy discussed geek stuff between themselves in so-called English. Then the

IT head ranted out incomprehensible technical details to us. I understood that the system was under strain: 80 per cent of the WASG capacity was damaged, and the remaining 20 per cent could not handle the current load.

'Hmmm,' Bakshi said, 'hmmm . . . that's really bad, isn't it?'

'So, what do you want us to do?' the IT head asked.

All eyes turned to Bakshi. It was a situation Bakshi hated, where he was being asked to take a decision or recommend action.

'Hmmm,' Bakshi said and flexed his knees slowly to buy time. 'We really need a methodical game plan here.'

'We can shut down the WASG system tonight. Western Computers main bay is running fine anyway,' the junior IT guy suggested.

'But WASG has not lost all its capacity. Boston won't like it if we shut the bay,' the IT head said.

'Hmmm,' Bakshi said again and pressed a sweaty palm on my desk. 'Upsetting Boston isn't a good idea at this time. We're already on a slippery slope at Connexions. Let's try to be proactively oriented here.'

Vroom couldn't resist a snigger at Bakshi's jargon.

'Sir, can I make a suggestion?' I said.

'What?' Bakshi said.

'We could enlist Bangalore's help,' I said.

'Bangalore?' Bakshi and the IT head said in unison.

'Yes, sir. It's Thanksgiving and the call volume is low, so Bangalore will be running light as well. If we pass most of our calls there, it will get busier for them, but it won't overload them. Meanwhile, we can handle a limited flow here,' I said.

'That makes sense. We can easily switch the flow for a few hours. We can fix the systems here in the morning,' the junior IT guy said.

'That's fine,' I said. 'And people will start their Thanksgiving dinner in the States soon, so call volumes will fall even more.'

Everyone at the desk looked at me and nodded, thrilled at the idea of an easy shift. Bakshi, however, had fallen into silent contemplation. I would love to know what he's thinking about in these moments.

'See, the thing is,' Bakshi said and paused again, 'aren't we comparing apples to oranges here?'

'What?' Vroom looked at Bakshi with a disgusted expression.

I wondered what Bakshi was talking about. Was I the apple? Who was the orange? What fruit was Bangalore?

'I have an idea. Why don't we enlist Bangalore?' Bakshi said.

'But that's what Shyam—' the junior IT guy began, but Bakshi interrupted him. Poor junior IT guy, he isn't familiar with Bakshi's ways.

'See, it sounds unusual, but sometimes you have to think outside the box,' Bakshi said and tapped his head in self-admiration.

'Yes, sir,' I said. 'That's a great idea. We have it all sorted now.'

'Good,' the IT guys said and began playing with the computer menus.

Before the IT guys left they told us that the WASG call volume would be super-light. We were overjoyed, but kept a straight face before Bakshi.

'See, problem solved,' Bakshi said. 'That's what I'm here for.'

'Lucky us, sir,' Priyanka said.

We thought Bakshi would leave, but he had other plans.

'Shyam, as you are free tonight, can you help me with some strategic documents? It will give you some exposure.'

'What is it, sir?' I said, not happy about sacrificing my night.

'I've just printed out ten copies of monthly data sheets,' Bakshi said, holding up some documents. 'For some reason the sheets are no longer in order. There are ten page ones, then page twos and so on. Can you help fix this?'

'You haven't collated them. You can choose the option when you print,' Vroom said.

'You can choose to collate?' Bakshi asked, as if we'd told him about an option for brain transplants.

'Yes,' Vroom said. 'Anyway, it is easier to take one print-out and photocopy the rest. It comes out stapled too.'

'I need to upgrade my technical skills. Technology changes so fast,' Bakshi said. 'But, Shyam, can you help reorder and staple them this time?'

'Sure,' I said.

Bakshi placed the sheets on my table and left the room.

Priyanka looked at me with her mouth open.

'What?' I said.

'I can't believe it.' She shook her head. 'Why do you let him do that to you?'

'C'mon, Priyanka, leave Shyam alone. Bakshi runs his life,' Vroom said.

'Exactly. Because he lets him. Why can't people stand up for themselves?'

I don't know why I can't stand up for myself, but I definitely can't

stand Priyanka's rhetorical questions. I tried to ignore her. However, her words had affected me. It was difficult to focus on the sheets. I stacked the first set ready to staple them when Vroom said, 'He can't take on Bakshi right now. Not at this time, Priyanka, while they're in the mood for firing people.'

'Yes, thanks, Vroom. Can someone explain the reality? I need to make a living. I don't have Mr Microsoft PowerPoint waiting for me in Seattle,' I said and pressed the stapler hard. I missed and the staple pin pierced my finger.

'Oww!' I screamed loud enough to uproot Military Uncle from his desk.

'What happened?' Priyanka said and stood up.

I lifted my finger to show the streaks of blood. A couple of drops spilt onto Bakshi's document.

The girls squealed 'eews' in rapid succession.

'Symbolism, man. Giving your lifeblood to this job,' Vroom said. 'Can someone give this guy a Band-Aid before he makes me throw up?'

'I have one,' Esha said, taking out a Band-Aid from her bag. 'That looks bad,' she said as the girls came up and surrounded me. Women love to repair an injury, as long as it's not too gruesome.

'It's nothing. Just a minor cut,' I said. I clenched my teeth hard.

Priyanka took out a few tissues from her bag. She held my finger and cleaned the blood around it.

'Ouch!' I screamed.

'Oh, the staple's still in there,' she said. 'We need tweezers.'

Esha had tweezers in her handbag. Girls' handbags hold enough to make a survival kit for Antarctica.

Priyanka held the tweezers and went to work on my finger with a surgeon's concentration.

'Here's the culprit,' she said as she pulled out a staple pin drenched in blood. Priyanka wiped my finger and then stuck the Band-Aid on it. With no more bloodletting to see, everyone returned to their seats and I went back to collating sheets.

Esha and Radhika began talking about Bakshi.

'He had no idea what IT was saying,' Radhika said.

'Yeah, but did you see his face?' Esha said. 'He looked like he was doing a CBI investigation.'

I looked at Priyanka. The letters CBI brought back memories. Even as I collated Bakshi's sheets, my mind drifted to Pandara Road.

My Past Dates with Priyanka—II
Have More Restaurant, Pandara Road: Nine months earlier

'Shyam,' Priyanka said as she tried to push me away. 'This is not the place to do these things. This is Pandara Road.'

'Oh really,' I said, refusing to move away. We were sitting at a corner table, partially hidden by a carved wooden screen. 'What's wrong with Pandara Road?' I said, continuing to kiss her.

'This is a family place,' she said, pushing me back again.

'So, families get made by doing these things.'

'Very funny. Anyway, you chose this place. I hope the food is as good as you said it was.'

'It's the best in Delhi,' I said. We were in Have More Restaurant, one of the half-dozen overpriced but excellent restaurants on Pandara Road.

'A hundred and thirty bucks for dhal!' Priyanka exclaimed as she opened the menu. It was embarrassing, especially as the waiter was already at our table to take the order.

'Just order, OK?' I said in a hushed voice.

Priyanka took five more minutes to place the order. Here is how she decides. Step one: sort all the dishes on the menu according to price. Step two: re-sort the cheaper ones based on calories.

'One naan, no butter. Yellow dhal,' she said as I glared at her.

'OK, not yellow, black dhal,' she said. 'And . . .'

'And one shahi paneer,' I said.

'You always order the same thing, black dhal and shahi paneer.'

'Yes, same girl, same food. Why bother experimenting when you already have the best?' I said.

'You are so cute,' she said, smiling. She pinched my cheeks and fed me a little vinegar-onion from the table. Hardly romantic, but I liked it.

She moved her hand away quickly when she saw a family being led to the table adjacent to us. The family consisted of a young married couple, their two little daughters and an old lady. The daughters were twins, probably four years old. The entire family had morose faces and no one said a word to each other. I wondered why they had bothered to go out when they could be grumpy for free at home.

'Anyway,' Priyanka said, 'what's the news?'

'Not much, Vroom and I are busy with the troubleshooting website.'

'Cool, how's it coming along?'

'Really well. Nothing fancy, though, the best websites are simple.'

The waiter arrived with our food.

Priyanka put micro-portions of food on her plate.

'Eat properly,' I said. 'Stop dieting all the time like Esha.'

'I'm not that hungry,' she said as I gave her human portions of food.

'Hey, did I tell you about Esha? Don't tell anyone,' she said.

I shook my head. 'You love to gossip. Don't you? Your name should be Miss Gossip FM 98.5,' I said.

'I *never* gossip,' she said. 'Oh my god, the food is so good here.'

My chest inflated with pride as if I had spent all night cooking it myself.

'Of course you love to gossip. Whenever someone starts with "don't tell anyone", that to me shows a juicy titbit of gossip is coming,' I said.

Priyanka blushed and the tip of her nose turned tomato red. She looked cute as hell. I would have kissed her right then, but the grumpy family was beginning to argue and I didn't want to spoil the sombre ambiance for them.

'OK, so maybe I gossip, but only a little bit,' Priyanka relented. 'But I read somewhere, gossip is good for you. It's a sign you're interested in people and care for them.'

'That is so lame.' I burst out laughing. 'Anyway, what about Esha? I know Vroom has the hots for her, but does she like him?'

'Shyam, that is old news. She's rejected Vroom's proposal before. The latest is that she had signed up for the Femina Miss India contest. Last week she got a rejection letter because she wasn't tall enough. She is five-five and the minimum is five-six. Radhika saw her crying in the toilet.'

'Oh wow! Miss India?'

'Come on, she's not that pretty. She should really stop this modelling thing. God, she is so thin, though. OK, I'm not eating any more.'

'Eat, stupid. Do you want to be happy or thin?' I said, pushing her plate back towards her.

'Thin.'

'Shut up, eat properly. And as for Esha, well too bad Miss India didn't work out. However, trying doesn't hurt,' I said.

'Well, she was crying. So it hurt *her*. After all, she's come to Delhi against her parents' wishes. It's not easy struggling alone,' she said.

I nodded.

We finished eating and the waiter reappeared like a genie to clear the plates.

'Dessert?' I said.

'No way. I'm too full,' Priyanka said.

'OK, one kulfi please,' I said to the waiter.

'No, order gulab jamun,' she said.

'Huh? I thought you didn't want . . . OK, one gulab jamun, please.'

The waiter went back into his magic bottle.

'How's your mum?' I said.

'The same. We haven't had a cry fest since last week's showdown, so that alone is a reason to celebrate. Maybe I will have half a gulab jamun.'

'And what happened last week?'

'Last week? Oh yes, my uncles were over for dinner. So picture this, we are all having butterscotch ice cream at the dining table. One uncle mentioned that my cousin was getting married to a cardiac surgeon.'

The waiter came and gave us the gulab jamun. I took a bite.

'Ouch, careful, these are hot,' I said. 'Anyway, what happened then?'

'So I'm eating my ice cream and my mother screams "Priyanka, make sure you marry someone well settled".'

'I'm going to be a team leader soon,' I said and fed her a slice of dessert.

'Relax, Shyam,' Priyanka said as she took a bite and patted my arm. 'It has nothing to do with you. The point is, how could she spring it on me in front of everyone? Like, why can't I just have ice cream like the others? Take my brother, nobody says anything to him while he stuffs his face.'

I laughed and signalled for the bill.

'So what did you do then?' I said.

'Nothing. I slammed my spoon down on the plate and left the room.'

'You're a major drama queen,' I said.

'Guess what she says to everyone then? "This is what I get for bringing her up and loving her so much. She doesn't care."'

I laughed as Priyanka imitated her mother. The bill arrived and my eyebrows shot up for a second as I paid the 463 rupees.

We stood up to leave and the grumpy family's voices reached us.

'What to do? Since the day this woman came to our house, our family's fortunes have been ruined,' the old woman was saying.

The daughter-in-law had tears in her eyes. She hadn't touched her food while the man was eating nonchalantly.

'Look at her now, sitting there with a stiff face. Go, go to hell now. Not only did you not bring anything, now you have dumped these two girls like two curses on me,' the mother-in-law said.

I looked at the little girls. They had identical plaits with cute pink ribbons in them. The girls were each holding one of their mother's hands and they looked really scared.

'Say something now, you silent statue,' the mother-in-law said and shook the daughter-in-law's shoulders.

'Why doesn't she say anything?' Priyanka whispered to me.

'She can't,' I said. 'When you have a bad boss, you can't say anything.'

'Who will pay for these two curses? Say something now,' the mother-in-law said as the daughter-in-law's tears came down faster and faster.

'I'll say something,' Priyanka shouted, facing the mother-in-law.

The grumpy family turned to look at us in astonishment. I looked for a deep hole to hide myself from the embarrassment.

'Who are you?' the husband asked.

'We'll worry about that later,' Priyanka said, 'but who the hell are *you*? Her husband I presume?'

'Huh? Yes, I am. Madam, this is a family matter,' he said.

'Oh really? You call this a family? Doesn't look like a family to me,' Priyanka said. 'I just see an old shrew and a loser wimp upsetting these girls. Don't you have any shame? Is this what you married her for?'

'See, she's another one,' the mother-in-law said. 'Look at the girls of today: they don't know how to talk. Look at her, eyes made up like a heroine's.'

'The young girls know how to talk and behave. It's you old people who need to be taught a lesson. These are your granddaughters and you are calling them a curse?' Priyanka said, her nose an even cuter red than before.

'Who are you, madam? What is your business here?' the husband said, this time in a firmer voice.

'I'll tell you who I am,' Priyanka said and fumbled in her handbag. She took out her call-centre ID card and flashed it for a nanosecond. 'Priyanka Sinha, CBI, Women's Cell.'

'What?' the husband said in half-disbelief.

'What is your number plate?' Priyanka said, talking in a flat voice.

'What? Why?' the bewildered husband asked.

She glanced at the keys on the table. 'It's a Santro, isn't it?'

'DGI 463. Why?' the husband said.

Priyanka took out her cellphone and pretended to call a number.

'Hello? Sinha here. Please retrieve records on DGI 463 . . . Yes . . . Santro . . . Thanks.'

'Madam, what is going on?' the husband said, his voice quivering.

'Three years. Harassing women is punishable by three years. A quick trial, no appeal,' Priyanka said and stared at the mother-in-law.

The old woman pulled one of the twin granddaughters onto her lap.

'What? Madam this is just a f-f-f-family affair—' the husband stammered.

'Don't say family!' Priyanka said, her voice loud.

'Madam,' the mother-in-law said, her tone now sweet, 'we are just here to have a meal. I don't even let her cook see, we just had—'

'Shut up! We have your records now. We will keep track. If you mess around, your son and you will have plenty of meals together—in jail.'

'Sorry, madam,' the husband said with folded arms. He asked for the bill and fumbled for cash. Within a minute they had paid and left.

I looked at Priyanka with my mouth open. 'CBI?' I said.

'Don't say anything,' she said, 'let's go.'

We sat in the Qualis I had borrowed from the call-centre driver.

'Stupid old witch,' Priyanka said. I started to drive. Five minutes later, Priyanka turned to me. 'OK, you can say what you want now.'

'I love you,' I said.

'What? Why this now?'

'Because I love it when you stand up for something you feel strongly about. And that you do such a horrible job of acting like a CBI inspector. I love the kohl round your eyes. I love it when your eyes light up when you have gossip for me. I love it that you say you don't want dessert and then ask me to change mine so you can have half. I love it that you believe in me and are patient about my career. Actually, you know what, Priyanka?' I said.

'What?'

'I may not be a heart surgeon, but the one little heart I have, I have given it to you.'

Priyanka laughed aloud and put her hand on her face.

'Sorry,' she said and shook her head, still laughing. 'Sorry, you were doing so well, except for the heart surgeon line. Now, that is seriously cheesy.'

'You know what?' I said and removed one hand from the steering wheel to tweak her nose. 'They should put you in jail for killing romantic lines.'

12.30 a.m.

'I can't believe this,' Radhika said and threw her mobile phone on her desk, breaking up my Pandara Road dream. She looked upset.

Everyone turned to look at her. She covered her face with her hands and took a couple of deep breaths.

'What's up?' Priyanka said.

'It's Anuj. Sometimes he can be so unreasonable,' Radhika said and passed her phone to Esha. On the screen was a text message. 'Read it out,' she said as she fumbled through her bag for her anti-migraine pills. 'Damn, I only have one pill left.'

'Really? OK,' Esha said and started reading the message: 'Show elders respect. Act like a daughter-in-law should. Good night.'

'What did I do wrong? I was in a hurry, that's all,' Radhika mumbled to herself as she took her pill with a sip of water.

Esha put a hand on her arm. 'What happened?' she asked softly.

'Anuj is in Kolkata. He called home and my mother-in-law told him, "Radhika made a face when I told her to crush the almonds more finely." Can you believe it? I was running to catch the Qualis and still made time to prepare her milk,' Radhika said and started to press her forehead. 'And then she told him, "I am old, if the pieces are too big they will choke my food pipe. Maybe Radhika is trying to kill me." Why would she say something so horrible?'

'And you're still knitting a scarf for her?' Vroom said.

'Trust me, being a daughter-in-law is harder than being a model,' Radhika said. 'Anyway, enough of my boring life.'

'Are you OK?' Esha said, still holding Radhika's arm.

'Yes, I'm fine. Sorry, guys, I overreacted. It's just a little miscommunication between Anuj and me.'

'Looks like your mother-in-law likes melodrama. She should meet my mother,' Priyanka said.

'Really?' Radhika said.

'Oh yes. She is the Miss Universe of melodrama. We cry together at least once a week. Though today she's on cloud nine,' Priyanka said.

My attention was diverted by a call flashing on my screen.

'I'll take it,' I said, raising my hand. 'Western Appliances, Sam speaking, how may I help you?'

It was one of my weird calls of the night. The caller was from Virginia and was having trouble defrosting his fridge. It took me four long minutes to figure out the reason. It turned out the caller was a 'big person', which is what Americans call fat people, and his fingers were too thick to turn the tiny knob which activates the defrosting mechanism. I suggested that he use a screwdriver and fortunately that solution worked after seven attempts.

'Thank you for calling Western Appliances, sir,' I said and ended the call.

'More politeness, agent Sam. Be more courteous,' I heard Bakshi's voice and felt his heavy breath on my neck.

'Sir, you again?' I said and turned round.

'Sorry, I forgot something important,' he said. 'Have you guys done the Western Computers website manual? I am finally sending the report to Boston.'

'Yes, sir. Vroom and I finished it yesterday,' I said and took out a copy from my drawer.

'Hmm,' Bakshi said as he scanned the cover sheet.

Western Computers Troubleshooting Website

User Manual and Project Details
Developed by Connexions, Delhi
Shyam Mehra and Varun Malhotra
(Sam Marcy and Victor Mell)

'Do you have a soft copy that you can email me?' Bakshi said. 'Boston wants it urgently.'

'Yes, sir,' Vroom said, 'I'll send it to you.'

'Also, did you do the collation, Sam?'

'Yes, sir,' I said and passed him the ten sets.

'Excellent. I empowered you, and you delivered the output. Actually, I have another document, the board meeting invite. Can you help?'

'What do I have to do?' I said.

'Here's a copy,' Bakshi said and gave me a five-page document. 'Can you photocopy ten copies for me, please? My secretary is off today.'

'Sir,' Vroom said, 'what's the board meeting for?'

'Nothing, just routine management issues,' Bakshi said.

'Are people going to get fired?' Vroom asked.

'Er . . .' Bakshi said, as usual, lost for words when asked something meaningful.

'There are rumours in the Western Computers main bay. We just want to know if we will be fine,' Vroom said.

Bakshi took a deep breath and said, 'I can't say much. All I can say is we are under pressure to rightsize ourselves.'

'Rightsize?' Radhika asked in genuine confusion.

'That means people are getting fired, doesn't it?' Vroom said.

Bakshi did not respond.

'Sir, we need to increase our sales force to get new clients. Firing people is not the answer,' Vroom said boldly.

Bakshi had a smirk on his face as he turned to Vroom. He put his hand on Vroom's shoulder. 'I like your excitement, Mr Victor,' he said, 'but a seasoned management has to study all underlying variables and come up with an optimal solution. It's not so simple.' He patted Vroom's shoulder and left.

Vroom waited until Bakshi was out of the room before he spoke again. 'This is insanity. Bakshi's f--ked up, so they're firing innocent agents!' he shouted.

'Stay calm,' I said and started assembling the sheets.

'Yes, stay calm. Like Mr Photocopy Boy here, who finds acceptance in everything,' Priyanka said.

'Excuse me,' I said, looking up. 'Are you talking about me?'

Priyanka kept quiet.

'What is your problem? I come here, make fifteen grand a month and go home. It sucks that people are being fired and I'm trying my best to save my job. Overall, yes, I accept my situation. And, Vroom, before I forget, can you email Bakshi the user manual, please?'

'I'm doing it,' Vroom said as he clicked his mouse, 'though what's going on here is still wrong.'

'Don't worry. We've finished the website. We should be safe,' I said.

'I hope so. Damn, it will suck if I lose my fifteen grand a month. If I don't get my pizza three times a week I'll die,' Vroom said.

'You have pizza that often?' Esha said.

'Isn't it unhealthy?' Radhika asked. Despite her recent text, she was back to knitting her scarf. Knitting habits die hard, I guess.

'No way. Pizzas are the ultimate balanced diet. Look at the contents: grain in the crust, milk protein in the cheese, vegetables and meat as toppings. It has all the food groups. I read it on the Internet: pizza is good for you.'

Vroom got all his information off the Internet.

'Pizzas are not healthy. I gain weight really fast if I eat a lot of it,' Priyanka said, 'especially with my lifestyle. I hardly get time to exercise and on top of that I work in a confined space.'

Priyanka's last two words made my heart skip a beat. 'Confined space' means one thing to me: that night at the 32nd Milestone disco.

My Past Dates with Priyanka—III
32nd Milestone, Gurgaon Highway: Seven months earlier

I shouldn't really call this one a date, since this time it was a group thing with Vroom and Esha joining us. I argued earlier with Priyanka about going out with work people, but she told me I should be less anti-social. Vroom picked 32nd Milestone and the girls agreed because the disco doesn't have a 'door-bitch'. According to Priyanka, a door-bitch is a hostess who stands outside the disco, screening every girl who goes in, and if you aren't wearing something cool the door-bitch will raise an eyebrow at you like you're a fifty-year-old auntie.

'Really? I've never noticed those door-girls before,' I said as we sat on stools at the bar.

'It's a girl thing. They size you up, and unless you're drop-dead gorgeous, you get that mental smirk,' Priyanka said.

'So why should you care? You *are* gorgeous,' I said. She smiled and pinched my cheek.

'Mental smirk? Girls and their coded communication. Anyway, drink, anyone?' Vroom said.

'Long Island Iced Tea, please,' Esha said, and I noticed how stunning she looked in her make-up. She wore a black fitted top and black trousers that were so tight she'd probably have to roll them down to take them off.

'Long Island? Want to get drunk quick or what?' I said.

'Come on. I need to de-stress. I ran around like mad last month chasing modelling agencies. Besides, I have to wash down last week's one thousand calls,' Esha said.

'That's right. Twelve hundred calls for me,' Vroom said. 'Let's all have Long Islands.'

'Long Island Iced Tea for me, please,' Priyanka said. She wore camel-coloured trousers and a pistachio-green sequinned kurti.

Vroom went to the bartender to collect our drinks while I scanned the disco. A remixed version of 'Dil Chahta Hai' played in the background. As it was Saturday night, the disco had more than three hundred customers. I noticed some stick-thin models on the dance floor. Their stomachs were so flat, if they swallowed a pill you'd probably see an outline of it when it landed inside. Esha's looks are similar.

Vroom came back with our drinks and we said 'cheers', trying to sound lively and happy, as people at a disco should.

'Congrats on the website, guys. I heard it's good,' Esha said, taking a sip.

'The website is cool,' Vroom said. 'The test customers love it. No more dialling. And it's so simple.'

'So, a promotion finally for Mr Shyam here,' Priyanka said. I noticed she had finished a third of her drink in just two sips.

'Now Mr Shyam's promotion is another story,' Vroom said. 'Maybe Mr Shyam would like to tell it himself.'

'Please, man. Some other time,' I said as Priyanka looked at me expectantly.

'OK, well Bakshi said he is talking to Boston to release a head-count. But it will take a while.'

'Why can't you just be firm with him?' Priyanka said.

'Like how? How can you be firm with your own boss?' I said, irritated.

'Cool it, guys,' Vroom said. 'It's a party night and—'

A big noise interrupted our conversation. We noticed a commotion on the dance floor as the DJ turned off the music.

'What's up?' Vroom said and we all went towards the dance floor where a fight had broken out. A gang of drunken friends had accused someone of pawing one of the girls with them and grabbed his collar. Soon, Mr Accused's friends had come to his defence. The music had stopped when someone knocked one guy flat on the floor. Several others were on top of each other and bouncers finally restored peace while a stretcher emerged to carry away the knocked-out guy. Five minutes later the music resumed and the anorexic girls' brigade were back on the floor.

'That's what happens to kids with rich dads and too much money,' Vroom said.

'Come on, Vroom. I thought you said money's a good thing,' Priyanka said with the confidence that comes from drinking a Long Island Iced Tea.

'Yes, doesn't money pay for your mobile, pizzas and discos?' I asked.

'Yes, but the difference is that I've earned it. These rich kids, they don't have a clue how hard it is to make cash,' Vroom said.

'C'mon, you get good money. Significantly more than the eight grand you made as a journalist trainee,' I said.

'Yes,' Vroom said. 'We get paid well, fifteen thousand a month. That's almost twelve dollars a day. Wow, I make as much a day as a US burger boy makes in two hours. Not bad for my college degree. Not bad at all. Nearly double what I made as a journalist anyway.'

Everyone was silent for a minute. Vroom on a temper trip is unbearable.

'Stop being so depressed. Let's dance,' Esha said, tugging at Vroom's hand.

'OK, but if anyone teases you, I'm not getting into a fight,' Vroom said.

'Don't worry, no one will. There are prettier girls here,' Esha said.

'I don't think so. Anyway, let's go,' Vroom said as they went to the dance floor. The song playing was 'Sharara Sharara', one of Esha's favourites.

Priyanka and I watched them dance from our seats.

'Want to go for a walk?' Priyanka said after a few minutes.

'Sure,' I said. We held hands and walked out of 32nd Milestone. We headed to the parking lot, where the music was softer.

'It's so calm here,' Priyanka said. 'I don't like it when Vroom gets all worked up. The boy needs to control his temper.'

'He's young and confused. Don't worry, life will slap him into shape. I think he regrets moving to Connexions sometimes. Besides, he hasn't taken his dad and mum's separation so well. It shows now and then.'

'Still, he should get a grip on himself. Get a steady girlfriend maybe, that will help him relax.'

'I think he likes Esha,' I said.

'I don't know if Esha is interested. She's really focused on her modelling.'

We reached our Qualis and I opened the door to take out a bottle.

'What's that?' she asked.

'Some Bacardi we keep handy. It's three hundred bucks for a drink inside, the cost of this whole bottle. Let's do a shot.' The bottle's lid acted as one cup, and I broke the top off a cigarette packet for another. We poured Bacardi into both and warmth travelled down from my lips to my insides.

'I'm sorry about the Bakshi comment I made inside,' she said.

'It's all right. Doesn't matter,' I said.

'I can be a bitch sometimes, but I do make it up to you. I'm a loving person, no?' she said, high from mixing her drinks.

'You're just fine,' I said and looked at her moist eyes. Her nose puckered up a bit and I could have looked at it for ever.

'Why are you looking at me like that?' she said and smiled.

'Like what?'

'The come-hither look. I see mischief in your eyes, mister,' she said playfully, grabbing both my hands.

'There's no mischief, that's just your imagination,' I said.

'We'll see,' she said and came up close. We hugged as she kissed me on my neck. 'Have you ever made love in a confined space?' she asked.

'*What?*' I said loudly, right into her ear.

'Ouch!' she said, rubbing her ear. 'Hello? You heard me right? We have the time, soft music and a desolate spot.'

'So?'

'So, step into the Qualis, my friend,' she said and opened the door. I climbed onto the back seat and she followed me.

The song changed to 'Mahi Ve' from the movie *Kaante*.

'I love this song,' she said and sat astride my lap, facing me. 'I like the lyrics. Their love is true, but fate has something else in store.'

'I never focus on the lyrics.'

'You just notice the scantily clad girls in the video,' she said and ran her fingers through my hair.

I stayed silent.

'So, you didn't answer my question—have you made love in a confined space?' she said.

'Priyanka, are you crazy or are you drunk?'

She unbuttoned the top few buttons of my shirt. 'Both,' she said.

We were quiet, apart from our breathing.

She confirmed that the windows were shut and ordered me to remove my shirt. She took off her kurti first, and then slowly unhooked her bra.

'Are you mad?' I gasped, raising my arms so she could pull my shirt over my head. She moved to kick my shirt aside and her foot landed on my left baby toe. 'Ouch!' I screamed.

'Oops, sorry,' she said in a naughty-apologetic tone. As she moved her foot away, her head hit the roof.

'Ouch,' she said. 'Sorry, this isn't as elegant as in the *Titanic* movie.'

'It's all right,' I said as I pulled her close. She started kissing me on my face, and in a few moments, I forgot I was in the company Qualis.

Twenty minutes later we collapsed in each other's arms on the back seat.

'Amazing. That was simply amazing, Ms Priyanka.'

'My pleasure, sir,' she said and winked at me. 'Can we lie here and talk for a while?'

'Sure,' I said, reaching for my clothes.

She cuddled me again after we had dressed.

'Do you love me?' she asked. Her voice was serious.

'More than anybody else on this planet,' I said, caressing her hair.

'You think I'm a caring person?' she said. She was close to tears.

'Why do you keep asking me that?' I said.

'My mother was looking at our family album today. She stopped at a picture of me when I was three: I'm sitting on a tricycle and my mother is pushing me. She saw that picture, and she said that I was so cute when I was three.'

'You're cute now,' I said and pressed her nose like a button.

'And she said I was so loving and caring then and that I wasn't so loving any more. She said she always wondered what had made me so heartless,' Priyanka said and burst into tears.

I held her tight and felt her body shake. I thought hard about what I could say. Guys can never figure out what to say in such emotional moments and always end up saying something stupid.

'Your mother is crazy . . .'

'Don't say anything about my mother. I love her. Can you just listen to me for five minutes?' Priyanka said.

'Of course. Sorry . . .' I said as her sobs grew louder. I swore to myself to stay quiet for the next five minutes. I started counting my breath to pass time. Sixteen a minute is my average; eighty breaths would mean I had listened to her for five minutes.

'We weren't always like this. My mum and I were best friends once—until class eight I think. Then as I became older, she became crazier.'

I wondered if I should point out that she had just told me not to call her mum crazy. However, I had promised myself I would keep quiet.

'She had different rules for me and my brother. She would comment on everything I wore, everywhere I went, whereas my brother . . . she would never say anything to him. I tried to explain it to her, but she just became more irritating, and by the time I reached college I couldn't wait to get away.'

'Uh-huh,' I said, calculating that almost half my time must have passed.

'All through college I ignored her and did what I wanted. But at one level I felt so guilty. I tried again to connect with her after

college, but she had a problem with everything: my thinking, my friends, my boyfriend.'

The last word caught my attention. I had to speak, even though only fifty-seven breaths had passed.

'Sorry, but did you say boyfriend?'

'Well, yeah. She knows I'm with you. And she has this thing about me finding someone settled.'

Settled? The word rewound and repeated itself in my head several times. *What does that mean anyway?* Just someone rich, or someone who gets predictable cash flows at the end of every month. Except parents do not say it that way because it sounds like they're trading their daughter to the highest bidder, which in some ways they are. They don't give a damn about love or feelings or crap like that. 'Show me the money and keep our daughter for the rest of your life.' That's the deal in an arranged marriage.

'What are you thinking about?' she said.

'I'm a loser according to your mum, aren't I?' I said.

'That's not what I said.'

'Don't you bring up Bakshi and my promotion every time we have a conversation?' I said, moving away.

'Why do you get so defensive? Anyway, if Bakshi doesn't promote you, you can look for another job.'

'I'm tired of job-hunting. There's nothing good out there. And I'm tired of rejections. Moreover, what is the point of joining another call centre? I'd just have to start as a junior agent all over again—without you, without my friends. And let me tell you this, I may not be team leader, but I am happy. I'm content. Do you realise that? And tell your drama-queen mum to come and tell me to my face that I'm a loser. And she can send you off with whichever settled-annuity-income earner she likes. I am what I am,' I said, my face beetroot-red.

'Shyam, please can you try and understand?'

'Understand what? Your mother? No, I can't. But I suspect deep down you might agree with her. Like, what am I doing with this loser?' I said.

'Stop talking nonsense,' Priyanka shouted. 'I just made love to you, for God's sake. And stop saying loser,' she said and burst into tears again.

Two brief knocks on the window disturbed our conversation. It was Vroom, and Esha was standing next to him.

'Hello? You lovebirds are inseparable, eh?' he said.

12.45 a.m.

The loud ring of the landline telephone brought me back from 32nd Milestone. Priyanka grabbed the phone. 'Hiiiii, Ganesh,' she said, her stretched tone too flirty, if you ask me. I wondered what *his* tone was like. *Get under the table. Tap the phone, Shyam*, a voice told me. I immediately scolded myself for such a horrible thought.

'Of course I knew it was you. No one else calls on this emergency line,' Priyanka said and ran her fingers through her hair. Women playing with their hair while talking to a guy is an automatic female preening gesture; I saw it once on the Discovery Channel.

'Yeah,' Priyanka said after a few seconds, 'I like cars. Which one are you planning to buy? . . . A Lexus?'

'A Lexus! The dude is buying a Lexus!' Vroom screamed.

'Ask him which model, ask him, please,' Vroom said, and Priyanka looked at him, startled. She shook her head at Vroom.

'What colour? C'mon, it's your car. How can I decide for you?' Priyanka said. Over the next five minutes Ganesh did most of the talking, while Priyanka kept saying monosyllabic yeses or the equivalent.

Tap the phone, the voice kept banging in my head. I hated myself for it, but I wanted to do it. I wondered when Priyanka would step away from the desk.

'No, no, Ganesh, it's fine, go for your meeting. I'll be here, call me later,' Priyanka said as she ended her call.

'Vroom, is the Lexus a nice car?' Priyanka said.

Vroom was already on the Net, surfing Lexus pictures. He turned his monitor to Priyanka. 'Check this out. The Lexus is one of the coolest cars. The guy must be loaded.'

Priyanka looked at Vroom's screen for a few seconds and then turned to the girls. 'He wants me to choose the colour. I don't think I should, though.'

Vroom pushed himself back in his swivel chair. 'Go for black or silver. Nothing is as cool as the classic colours. Or the dark blue mica,' he said. 'And tell him the interiors have to be dark leather.'

Meanwhile, my insides were on fire. I felt like throwing up.

I wondered when I could tap the phone. It was totally wrong, and Priyanka would kill me if she found out, but I had to do it.

I tried to set the stage so I had an excuse to get under the table.

'Why have there been no calls in the last ten minutes?' I said. 'I should check if the connections are fine.'

'Leave it alone,' Esha said. 'I'm enjoying the break.'

'Bio?' Priyanka said to Esha. It was their code word for a visit to the toilet together for a private conversation.

'Sure.' Esha sensed the need for gossip and got up from her chair.

'I'll come too,' Radhika said and stood up. She turned to me: 'The girls want a bio break, team leader.'

'You're *all* going?' I said, pretending to be reluctant, but secretly thrilled. This was my chance. 'Well, OK, since nothing much is happening right now.'

As soon as the girls were out of sight I dived under the table.

'What are you doing?' Vroom said.

'Nothing. I don't think the connections are firm,' I said.

'And what the hell do you know about the connections?' Vroom said. He bent down to look under the table. 'Tell me honestly what you're doing.'

I told him about my urge to tap the phone. He scolded me for five seconds, but then got excited by the challenge and joined me under the table.

'The girls will kill us if they find out,' Vroom said.

'They won't have a clue,' I said, connecting the wires. 'Look, it's almost done.'

Vroom picked up the landline and we tested the arrangement. I could select an option on my computer and listen in on the landline via my headset.

'Why are you doing this?' Vroom said.

'I don't know. Don't ask me.'

'And why are the girls taking so long?'

'You know them, they have their girl talk in the toilet.'

'And you don't want to hear what they're saying? I'm sure they're discussing Mr Microsoft there.'

'Oh no,' I said, worried about what I could be missing. 'Although how would we be able to eavesdrop?'

'From the corner stall of the men's toilet,' Vroom said. 'It shares a wall with their toilet. If you press your ear against the wall, you can hear them.'

'Really?' I said, my eyes lighting up.

Vroom nodded.

'It'll be wrong, though, eavesdropping through a stall,' I said.

'Yes, it will.'

'But who cares? Let's go,' I said and Vroom and I jumped off our chairs.

Vroom and I squeezed into the corner stall of the WASG men's toilet. We pressed our ears against the wall until I could hear Radhika's voice.

'Yes, he sounds like a really nice guy,' she was saying.

'But I shouldn't tell him what colour to get, no? It's his car and it's so expensive. But do you know what he said?' Priyanka said.

'What?' Radhika said.

'He said, "No, it is *our* car," and then he said, "You have brought colour to my life, so you get to choose the colour."'

'Oh, he sounds so romantic,' Esha said.

'That is such a lame loser line. Colour to my life, my ass,' I said to Vroom.

'Shh. They'll hear us, stupid. Keep quiet,' Vroom said.

'Excuse me,' Esha said, 'but I have to change this . . . Ouch!'

'What's going on?' I said.

Vroom shrugged his shoulders.

'Esha, your wound hasn't healed for days. Just a Band-Aid isn't enough,' Priyanka said. I guessed Esha was changing the Band-Aid on her shin.

'I'm fine. As long as it heals before the Lakmé fashion week,' Esha said.

'Let's go back, girls, it is almost one a.m.,' Radhika said. 'Otherwise the boys will grumble.'

'They always grumble. Like they never have a cigarette break,' Esha said.

'But today they are extra grumbly. At least *someone* is,' Radhika said.

Vroom pointed a finger at me. Yes, the girls were talking about me.

I grumbled in lip-sync.

'You think Shyam is not taking the news well?' Priyanka said.

'You tell us. You know him better than we do,' Esha said.

'I wish I knew him now. I don't know why he sulks and acts so childishly sometimes,' Priyanka said as they left the toilet.

'Childish? Me? I am childish?' I said to Vroom. 'What the hell. Mr Microsoft says his cheesy lines and he's cute and romantic. I say nothing and I'm childish.' I banged a fist on the stall door.

'Shyam, don't behave like a kid,' Vroom said.

We came out of the stall and I jumped back as I saw Bakshi by the sink.

Through the mirror, Bakshi saw both of us. His jaw dropped.

'Hello, sir,' Vroom said and went up to the sink next to him.

'Sir, it's not what you think,' I said, pointing back at the stall.

'I'm not thinking anything. What you do in your personal lives is up to you. But why aren't you at the desk?' Bakshi said.

'Sir, we just took a short break. The call traffic is very low today,' I said.

'Did you log your break? The girls are missing from the bay as well,' Bakshi said. His face was turning from shiny pink to shiny red.

'Really? Where did the girls go?' Vroom said.

Bakshi walked to the urinal stalls. I went to the stall adjacent to him.

'Didn't you just use the toilet?' Bakshi said.

'Sir,' I said and hesitated. 'Sir, that was different, with Vroom.'

'Please. I don't want to know,' Bakshi said.

'Sir, no,' I said. 'Sir, how come you're using this rest room?' I said.

'I didn't mean to. I always use the executive toilet,' Bakshi said.

'Yes, sir,' I said and nodded my head. I had acknowledged his magnanimous gesture of peeing in the same bay as us. But why was he here?

'Anyway, I came to your desk to drop off a courier delivery for Eliza. I've left the parcel on her desk,' Bakshi said as he zipped up.

'And, Sam, can you tell the voice agents to come to my office for a team meeting later, say two thirty a.m., OK?' Bakshi said.

'What's up, sir?' Vroom said.

'Nothing. I want to share some pertinent insights with the resources,' Bakshi said. 'Anyway, thanks for the user manual, I've already sent it to Boston,' Bakshi said.

'You did?' both of us said in unison.

'Sir, if you could have copied us in on the email . . . we'd like to be kept in the loop,' Vroom said. Good one.

'Oh, didn't I? I'm so sorry. I'm not good with emails. I'll just forward it to you. But you guys man the bay now, OK?'

'Of course, sir,' I said.

'And have you finished the ad hoc task I gave you?' Bakshi said.

'What, sir?' I said, and then realised he meant the photocopying of the board meeting invite. 'Almost done, sir.'

Bakshi nodded and left us behind in the rest room.

'Is he a total moron or what? Can't cc people on an email?' Vroom said.

'Easy, man. Let's get back to the bay,' I said.

1.00 a.m.

We returned from the men's room to find the call flow had resumed. Radhika explained to a caller how to open his vacuum cleaner. Esha taught an old man to preheat an oven and dodged his telephonic your-voice-is-so-sexy pass.

Another call flashed on my screen.

'I know this guy. Can I take this call?' Vroom said.

'Who is it?' I raised my eyebrows.

'A prick called William Fox. Listen in if you want,' Vroom said.

I selected the option on my computer.

'Good afternoon, Western Appliances, Victor speaking. How may I help you today, Mr Fox?' Vroom said.

'You'd better darn well help me, smart-ass,' the man on the phone said. He sounded drunk.

'Who is he?' I whispered, but Vroom shushed me.

'Sir, if I may confirm, I am speaking to Mr William Fox?'

'You bet you are. You think just 'cos you know my name it's OK to sell me crap hoovers?'

'What is the problem with your vacuum cleaner, sir? It's a VX100?'

'It doesn't suck dust any more. It just doesn't.'

'Sir, do you remember when you last changed the dust bags?' Vroom said.

'Like f--k I remember when I changed the bags. It's just a crap machine, you dumb-ass.'

Vroom took three deep breaths and remembered the suggested line to use in such situations.

'Sir, I request you not to use that language.'

'Oh really? Then make your f--king hoover work.'

Vroom pressed a button on his phone before he spoke again. 'You son of a bitch,' he said.

'What are you doing?' I said, panicking.

'Just venting, don't worry, it's on mute,' he smirked. He pressed the button again and said, 'Sir, you need to change the dust bags when they are full.'

'Who am I speaking to?' The voice on the phone became agitated.

'Victor, sir.'

'Tell me your name. You're some kid in India, ain't ya, boy?'

'Yes, sir. I am in India.'

'So what did you have to do to get this job? Degree in nuclear physics?'

'Sir, do you need help with your cleaner or not?'

'C'mon, son, answer me. I don't need your help. Yeah, I'll change the dust bag. What about you guys? When will you change your dusty country?'

'Excuse me, sir, but I want you to stop talking like that,' Vroom said.

'Oh really, now some brown kid's telling me what to do—' William Fox's voice stopped abruptly as I cut off the call.

Vroom didn't move for a few seconds. His whole body trembled and he was breathing heavily, then he placed his elbows on the table and covered his face with his hands.

'You don't have to talk to those people. You know that,' I said to Vroom.

The girls glanced at us while they were still on their calls.

'Vroom, I'm talking to you,' I said.

He raised his face and slowly turned to look at me. Then he banged his fist on the table. 'Damn!' he screamed and kicked hard under the table.

'What the . . .' Priyanka said. 'My call just got cut off.'

Vroom's kick had dislodged the power wires, disconnecting all our calls. He stood up and his six-foot-plus frame towered above us.

'Guys, there are two things I cannot stand,' he said and showed us two fingers. 'Racists. And Americans.'

Priyanka started laughing.

'What is there to laugh at?' I said.

'Because there is a contradiction. He doesn't like racists, but can't stand Americans,' Priyanka said.

'Why?' Vroom said, ignoring Priyanka. 'Why do some dim-witted Americans get to act superior to us? Do you know why? Not because they are smarter. Not because they are better people. But because their country is rich and ours is poor. That is the only damn reason. Because the losers who have run our country for the last fifty years couldn't do better than make India one of the poorest countries on earth.'

'Stop overreacting, Vroom. Some stupid guy calls and—' Radhika said.

'Look, you've broken down the entire system.' I pointed to the blank screens.

'No more calls for now,' Priyanka said, rolling her eyes.

'Let me take a look,' I said and went under the table. I was more worried about the wires tapping the emergency phone. However, they were intact.

'Shyam, wait,' Esha said, 'we have a great excuse for not taking calls. Leave it like it is for a while.'

Everyone agreed. We decided to call Systems after twenty minutes.

'Why was Bakshi here?' Priyanka asked. 'I saw him leave the men's toilet.'

'To drop off a courier delivery for Esha,' I said. 'He told me there's a team meeting at two thirty a.m. Oh man, I still have to photocopy the invite.'

'What delivery?' Esha said. 'This?' She lifted a packet near her computer.

'Must be,' Vroom said, 'though what courier firm delivers at this time of night?'

Esha opened the packet and took out two bundles of hundred-rupee notes. One bundle had a small yellow Post-it Note on it. She read the Post-it and her face went pale.

'Wow, someone's rich,' Vroom said.

'Not bad. What's the money for?' Radhika said.

'It's nothing. Just a friend returning money she borrowed,' Esha said.

She dumped the packet in her drawer and took out her mobile phone. Her face was pensive, as if she was debating whether or not to make a call. I collected my sheets to go to the photocopying room.

'Want to help me?' I called out to Vroom.

'No, thanks. People I used to work with are becoming national TV reporters, but look at me. I'm taking calls from losers and being asked to help with loser jobs,' Vroom said and looked away.

1.30 a.m.

I switched on the photocopier in the supplies room and put Bakshi's stack in the document feeder. I'd just pressed the 'start' button on the agenda document when the copier creaked and groaned to a halt. 'Paper Jam: Tray 2' appeared in big, bold letters on the screen.

The copier in our supplies room is not a machine, it's a person. A person with a psychotic soul and a grumpy attitude. Whenever you copy more than two sheets, there's a paper jam. After that, the machine teases you: it gives you systematic instructions on how to unjam it—open cover, remove tray, pull lever—but if it knows so much, why doesn't it fix itself?

'Damn,' I mumbled to myself as I bent down to open the paper

trays. I turned a few levers and pulled out whatever paper was in sight.

I stood up, rearranged the documents on the feeder tray and pressed 'start' again, not realising that my ID was resting on Bakshi's original document. As the machine restarted it sucked in my ID along with the paper. The ID pulled at its strap, which tightened round my neck.

'Aargh,' I said as I choked. The strap curled tighter round my neck. I screamed loudly and pulled at my ID, but the machine was stronger. I was sure it wanted to kill me. I started kicking the machine hard.

Vroom came running into the room. 'What the . . .' He appeared nonplussed. He saw A4 sheets spread all over the room, a groaning photocopier and me lying down on top of it, desperately tugging at my ID strap.

'Do something,' I said in a muffled voice.

'Like what?' he said and bent over to look at the machine. The screen was flashing 'Paper Jam' while my ID strap ran right into the machine.

Vroom looked around the supplies room and found a pair of scissors.

'Should I?' he said and smiled at me. 'I really want the others to see this.'

'Shut . . . up . . . and . . . cut,' I said.

Snap! And my breath came back.

'OK now?' Vroom asked, throwing the scissors back in the supplies tray.

I nodded as I rubbed my neck and took wheezing breaths. I rested my head on the warm, soothing glass of the photocopier, but I must have rested it too hard, or maybe my head is too heavy, because I heard a crack.

'Get off,' Vroom said and pulled me off the machine. 'You broke the glass. What is it with you, man? Having a bad office supplies day?'

'Who knows?' I said, collecting Bakshi's document. 'I really am good for nothing. I can't even do these loser jobs. I almost died. Can you imagine the headline: COPIER DECAPITATES MAN, AND DUPLICATES DOCUMENT.'

Vroom laughed and put his arm round my shoulder.

'Chill out, man. I apologise.'

'For what?' I said. Nobody has ever apologised to me in the past twenty-six years of my life.

'I'm sorry I was rude. First there are these rumours about the call centre closing down, then my old workmate Boontoo makes it to NDTV and Bakshi sends the document without copying us in. Meanwhile, some psycho caller screams curses at me. It just gets to you sometimes.'

'What gets to you?' I asked. I was trying to copy Bakshi's document again, but the photocopier was hurling abusive messages at the screen every time I pressed a button. Soon it self-detected a crack in the glass. It switched itself off altogether. I think it had committed suicide.

'Life,' Vroom said, 'life gets to you. You think you're perfectly happy—you know, good salary, nice friends, life's a party—but all of a sudden, in one tiny snap, everything can crack, like the glass pane of this photocopier.'

I didn't fully understand Vroom's glass-pane theory of life, but his face told me he was upset. I decided to soothe the man who had just saved my life.

'Vroom, you know what your problem is?'

'What?'

'You don't have real love in your life. You need to fall in love, be in love and stay in love. That's the void in your life,' I said firmly.

'You think so?' Vroom said. 'I've had girlfriends. I'll find another one soon—you know that.'

'Not those kind of girls. Someone you really care about. And I think we all know who that is.'

'Esha?' he said.

I kept quiet.

'She isn't interested. I've asked her. She has her modelling and says she has no time for a relationship. Besides, she says I don't know what love is. I care for cars and bikes more than girls.'

I laughed. 'You do.'

'That's such an unfair comparison. It's like asking women what they prefer, nice shoes or men. There's no easy answer.'

'Really? So we are benchmarked to footwear?'

'Trust me, women can ignore men for sexy shoes.'

'But do you think you love Esha?' I said.

'Can't say. But I've felt something for her for over a year now.'

'But you dated other girls last year.'

'Those girls weren't important. They were like TV channels you surf while looking for the programme you really want to see. You're

with that Curly Wurly chick, even though you still have feelings for Priyanka.'

'Shefali is there to help me move on,' I said.

'Screw moving on. That girl is enough to put you off women for ever. Maybe that will help you get over Priyanka,' Vroom said.

'Don't change the subject. We're talking about you. I think you should ask Esha again for a real relationship. Do it, man.'

Vroom looked at me for a few seconds.

'Will you help me?' he said.

'Me? You're the expert with girls,' I said.

'This one is different. The stakes are higher. Can you be around when I talk to her? Just listen to our conversation, then we can analyse it later.'

'OK, sure. So, let's do it now. We have free time. Afterwards the calls will begin and we'll be busy again,' I said.

'OK. Where do we do it?' Vroom said as he put his hand on his forehead to think. 'The dining room?'

The dining room made sense. I could be nearby, but inconspicuous.

1.45 a.m.

'Is everything OK? I heard a noise,' Esha said, as we returned.

'The photocopier died. Anyone for a snack?' I said.

'Yes, let's go. I need a walk. Come on, Priyanka,' Esha said and tried to pull Priyanka up by her upper arm.

'No, I'll stay here,' Priyanka said and smiled. 'Ganesh might call.'

A scoop of hot molten lead entered through my head and left from my toes. *Try to move on*, I reminded myself.

Radhika was about to get up when I stopped her.

'Actually, Radhika, can you stay here? If Bakshi walks by, at least he'll see some people at the desk,' I said.

Radhika sat down puzzled as we left the room.

THE DINING AREA at Connexions is a cross between a restaurant and a college hostel mess. There are three rows of long tables, with seating on both sides. The tables have a small vase every three feet. Management recently renovated the place when some overpriced consulting firm recommended that a bright dining room would be good for employee motivation. A much cheaper option would have been to just fire Bakshi, if you ask me.

Vroom took a cheese sandwich and chips—they don't serve Indian food, again for motivational reasons—on his tray and sat at one of the tables. Esha took a soda water and sat opposite Vroom. I think she eats once every three days. I took an unhealthily large slice of chocolate cake.

I sat at the adjacent table, took out my phone and started typing fake text messages.

'Why isn't Shyam sitting with us?' Esha said to Vroom.

'Private texting,' Vroom said. Esha rolled her eyes and nodded.

'Actually, Esha, I wanted to tell you something,' Vroom said.

'Yeah?' Esha said to Vroom, an eyebrow rising in suspicion. The invisible female antennae were out and suggesting caution. 'Talk about what?'

'Esha,' Vroom said. 'I've been thinking about you a lot lately.'

'Really?' she said and looked sideways to see if I was eavesdropping. I made an extra effort to show that I was focusing on my cake.

'Yes, really, Esha. I may have met a lot of girls, but no one is like you. And I think rather than fool around I could do with a real relationship. So I'm asking you again, will you go out with me?'

Esha was quiet for a few minutes. 'I've told you before. I have to focus on my modelling career. I can't afford the luxury of having a boyfriend,' she said, her voice unusually cold.

'What is with you, Esha? Don't you want someone to support you?' Vroom said.

'That's right, with three different girlfriends last year I'm sure you will always be there for me,' Esha said.

'The other girls were just for fun. They meant nothing, they're like pizza or movies. They're channel surfing, you're more serious,' Vroom said.

'So what serious channel am I? The BBC?' Esha said.

'I've known you for more than a year. I thought we were friends. I just wanted to take it to the next level . . .' Vroom said.

'Please stop it,' Esha said, and covered her eyes with her hands. 'You chose the worst time to talk about this.'

'What's wrong, Esha? Can I help?' Vroom said, his voice now full of concern rather than the nervousness of romance.

She shook her head frantically.

I knew Vroom had failed miserably. Esha wasn't interested and was in a really strange mood. I finished my chocolate cake and went to the counter to get water. By the time I returned, they had left the dining room.

1.55 a.m.

I returned to the WASG bay with the taste of chocolate cake lingering in my mouth. I sat down at my desk and began surfing irrelevant websites. Radhika was giving Priyanka recommendations on the best shops in Delhi for bridal dresses, while Esha and Vroom were silent. I called IT to fix our desk. They were busy, but promised to come in ten minutes.

The spare landline's ring startled us all.

'Ganesh,' Priyanka said as she scrambled to pick up the phone. I kept a calm face while I selected the option to listen in on the call.

'Mum,' Priyanka said, 'why aren't you asleep? Who gave you this number?'

'Sleeping? No one has slept a wink today,' her mother said.

The tapped line was exceptionally clear. Her mother sounded elated, which was unusual for a woman who, according to Priyanka, had spent most of her life in self-imposed, obsessive-compulsive depression.

Priyanka's mother explained how Ganesh had just called her and given her the emergency line number. He had told her that he was 'on top of the world'.

'I'm so happy today. Look how God sent such a perfect match right to our door. And I used to worry about you so much,' Priyanka's mother said.

'That's great, Mum, but what's up?' Priyanka said. 'I'll be home in a few hours. How come you called here?'

'Can't a mother call her daughter?' Priyanka's mum said. 'Can't a mother' is one of her classic lines.

'No, Mum, I just wondered. Anyway, Ganesh and I have spoken a couple of times today.'

'And did he tell you his plans?'

'What plans?'

'He is coming to India next month. Originally he'd planned the trip so he could see girls, but now that he has made his choice, he wants to get married instead on the same trip,' Priyanka's mum announced.

'What?' Priyanka said, 'next month?' and looked around at all of us with a shocked expression. Everyone returned puzzled looks, as if they didn't know what was going on. I also pretended to look confused.

'Mum, no!' Priyanka wailed. 'How can I get married next month? That's less than five weeks away.'

'Oh, you don't have to worry about that. I am there to organise everything. You wait and see, I'll work day and night to make it a grand event.'

'Mum, I'm not worried about organising a party. I have to be *ready* to get married. I hardly know Ganesh,' Priyanka said.

'Huh? Of course you're ready for it. When the families have fixed the match and bride and groom are happy, why delay? And the boy can't keep visiting again and again. He's in an important position after all.'

Yeah, right, I thought. He was probably one of the thousands of Indian geeks coding away at Microsoft. But to his in-laws, he was Bill Gates himself.

'Mum, please. I can't go ahead with it next month. Sorry, but no. I can't marry anyone I have only known for five weeks.'

Priyanka's mother stayed silent for a while. I thought she would retaliate, but then I figured out that the silence was more effective than words.

'Mum, are you there?' Priyanka asked after ten seconds.

'Yes, I'm still here. I'll be dead soon, but unfortunately I'm still here.'

'Mum, c'mon now . . .'

'Don't even make me happy just by chance,' Priyanka's mother said. What a killer line, I thought. I almost applauded.

'Mum, please. Don't do this.'

'You know I prayed for one hour today . . . praying you stay happy . . . for ever,' Priyanka's mother said as she broke into tears. Whoever starts crying first always has an advantage in an argument. This works for Priyanka's mother, who at least has obedient tear glands, if not an obedient daughter.

'Mum, don't create a scene. I'm at work. What do you want from me? I have agreed to the boy. Now why is everyone pushing me?'

'Isn't Ganesh nice? What's the problem?' her mother said in a tragic tone that could put any Bollywood hero's mother to shame.

'Mum, I didn't say he isn't nice, I just need time.'

'You aren't distracted, are you? Are you still talking to that useless call-centre chap, what's his name? Shyam?'

I jumped.

'No, Mum. That's over. I've agreed to Ganesh, right?'

'So, why can't you agree to next month—for everyone's happiness? Can't a mother beg her daughter for this?'

There you go: can't-a-mother No. 2 for the night.

Priyanka closed her eyes to compose herself. 'Can I think about it?'

'Of course. Think about it. But think for all of us, not just yourself.'

'OK. I will. Just . . . just give me some time.'

Priyanka hung up. 'Can you believe it? She wants me to get married next month. Next month!' Priyanka said and stood up. 'They brought me up for twenty-five years, and now they can't wait more than twenty-five days to get rid of me. What is it with these people? Am I such a burden?' Priyanka repeated her conversation to Esha and Radhika.

'It doesn't matter, right? Why drag it out?' Radhika said to Priyanka.

'Yes, you get to drive the Lexus sooner, too,' Vroom said. I gave him a firm glare out of the corner of my eye.

'I'm so not ready for this. In one month I'll be someone's wife. Gosh, little kids will call me auntie,' Priyanka said.

Everyone discussed the pros and cons of Priyanka getting married in four weeks' time. Most of them felt it wasn't such a big deal once she had chosen the guy. Of course, most people didn't give a damn about me.

In the midst of the discussions the Systems guy returned to our desk.

'What happened here?' he said from under the table. 'Looks like someone ripped these wires apart.'

'I don't know,' I said. 'See if we can get some traffic again.'

Priyanka's mother and her words—'that useless call-centre chap'—resounded in my head. I remembered the time when Priyanka told me her mother's views about me. It was on one of our last dates, at Mocha Café.

My Past Dates with Priyanka—IV
Mocha Café, Greater Kailash I: Five months earlier

We promised to meet on one condition: we wouldn't fight. No blame games, no sarcastic comments and no judgmental remarks. She was late again. I fiddled with the menu and looked around. Mocha's decor had a Middle Eastern twist, with hookahs, velvet cushions and coloured-glass lamps everywhere. Many of the tables were occupied by couples, sitting with intertwined fingers, obviously deeply in love. It was perfect, like all they needed to be happy was each other. Aren't the silly delusions in the initial stage of a relationship amazing?

My life was nowhere near perfect, of course. For starters, my girlfriend, if I could still call her that, was late. Plus I could sense she was itching to dump me. Priyanka and I had ended eight of our last ten phone calls with one of us hanging up on the other.

I hadn't slept the entire day, which hadn't left me feeling too good. My job was going nowhere, with Bakshi bent on sucking every last drop of my blood. Maybe he was right—I just didn't have the strategic vision or managerial leadership or whatever you are supposed to have to do well in life. Maybe Priyanka's mum was right too, and her daughter was stuck with a loser.

These thoughts enveloped me as she came in. She had just had a haircut and her waist-length hair was now just a few inches below her shoulders. I liked her with long hair, but she never listened to me. Anyway, her hair still looked nice. She wore a white linen top and a flowing lavender skirt with lots of crinkly edges. I stared at my watch as a sign of protest.

'Sorry, Shyam,' she said as she put a giant brown bag on the table, 'that hairdresser took so long. I told him I had to leave early.'

'No big deal. A haircut has to be more important than me,' I said.

'I thought we said no sarcasm,' she said, 'and I did say sorry. We promised not to fight. Saturday is the only day I get time for a haircut.'

'I told you to keep your hair long,' I said.

'I did for a long time, but it's so hard to maintain, Shyam. I'm sorry, but you have to understand, I had the most boring hair and I couldn't do anything with it. And it's so hot in the Delhi heat.'

'Whatever,' I said dismissively, looking at the menu. 'What do you want?'

'I want my Shyam to be in a good mood,' she said and held my hand. We didn't intertwine fingers, though.

'My' Shyam. I guess I still count, I thought.

'Hmm,' I said and let out a big sigh. If she was trying to make peace, I guess I had to do my bit. 'We can have their special Maggi noodles.'

'Maggi? You've come all this way to eat Maggi?' she said, and took the menu from me. 'And check this out: ninety bucks for Maggi?' She said the last phrase so loudly that the tables and a few waiters next to us heard.

'Priyanka, we earn now. We can afford it,' I said.

'Order chocolate brownie and ice cream,' she said.

'I thought you said you'll have whatever I want,' I said.

'Yes, but Maggi?' she said and made a quirky face. Her nostrils

contracted for a second. I had seen that face before, and I couldn't help but smile. I saved myself time by ordering the brownie.

The waiter brought the chocolate brownie and placed it in front of Priyanka—half a litre of chocolate sauce dripping over a blob of vanilla ice cream on top of a huge slice of rich chocolate cake. It was a heart attack served on a plate. Priyanka had two spoons and slid the dish towards me.

'Did you have a heart-to-heart with your mum?' I said.

Priyanka wiped her chocolate-lined lips with tissue. I felt like kissing her right then. However, I hesitated. When you hesitate in love, you know something is wrong.

'Me and my mum,' she said, 'are incapable of having a rational, sane conversation. I tried to talk to her about you and my plans to study further.'

'What happened?'

'In seven minutes we were crying. Can you believe it?'

'With your mother, I can. What exactly did she say?'

'She said she has never liked you because you aren't settled, and because since the day I started dating you I have changed and become an unaffectionate, cold person.'

'Unaffectionate? What the . . .' I shouted, my face turning red. 'How the hell have I changed you?'

The second comment cut me into slices. Sure, I hated the 'not settled' tag, but there was some truth to that. But how could she accuse me of turning Priyanka into a cold person?

She didn't say anything, but her face softened and I heard tiny sobs. It was so unfair, I was the one being insulted: I should be the one getting to cry.

'Listen, Priyanka, your mum is a psycho,' I said.

'No she's not. It's not *because* of you, but I *have* changed. Maybe it is because I'm older, and she confuses it with my being with you. We used to be so close, and now she doesn't like anything I do,' she said and broke down into full-on crying. I got some you-horrible-man looks from girls at other tables.

'Calm down, Priyanka. What does she want? And tell me honestly, what do you want?' I said.

Priyanka shook her head and remained silent.

'Please, talk to me,' I said.

She finally spoke. 'She wants me to show that I love her. She wants me to make her happy and marry someone she chooses for me.'

'And what do you want?' I said.

'I don't know,' she told the tablecloth.

What the hell? I thought. All I get after four years of togetherness is an 'I don't know'?

'You want to dump me, don't you? I'm not good enough for your family.'

'It isn't like that, Shyam. She married my dad, who was just a government employee, because he seemed like a decent human being. But her sisters waited and married better-qualified boys, and they are richer today. Her concern for me comes from that. She is my mother. It's not as if she doesn't know what's good for me. I want someone doing well in his career too.'

'So your mother is not the only cause for the strain in our relationship. It's you as well.'

'A relationship never flounders for one reason alone, there are many issues. You don't take feedback. You're sarcastic. You don't understand my ambitions. Don't I always tell you to focus on your career?'

'Just get lost, OK,' I said. My loud voice attracted the attention of the neighbouring tables.

'Shyam, it's this attitude of yours. At home, my mother doesn't understand, and now it's you who doesn't. Why have you become like this? You've changed, Shyam, you are not the same happy person I first met.'

'Nothing has happened to *me*. It's you who finds new faults in me every day. I have a bad boss and I'm trying to manage as happily as possible. What has happened to you? You used to eat at truck drivers' dhabas, now all of a sudden you need to marry an expat cardiac surgeon to make ends meet?'

We stared at each other for two seconds.

'OK, it's my fault. That's what you want to prove, isn't it? I'm a confused, selfish, mean person, right?' she said.

I couldn't believe I had loved her and those flared nostrils for four years, and now it was difficult to say four sentences without disagreeing.

I sighed. 'I thought there was to be no arguing, blaming or sarcasm, but that's all we've done.'

'I care for you a lot,' she said and held my hand.

'Me, too,' I said, 'but I think we need to take care of other things in our lives as well.'

We asked for the bill and made cursory conversation about the weather and the café decor. We talked a lot, but we weren't communicating at all.

'Call me in the evening if you're free,' I said as I paid and got up to leave.

It had come to this: now we had to tell each other to call. Previously, not a waking hour had passed without one of us texting or calling the other.

'OK, or I'll text you,' she said.

We had a basic hug without really touching. A kiss was out of the question.

'Sure,' I said, 'it's always nice to get your messages.'

Sarcasm. Man, will I never learn?

1.59 a.m.

Mocha Café and its coloured Arabian lights faded away from my mind as I returned to WASG's tube-lit interiors. I checked the time: it was close to 2.00 a.m. I got up to take a short walk. I went to the corner of the room where Military Uncle sat and we nodded to each other. I looked at his screen and saw pictures of animals—chimps, rhinos, hippos, lions and deer.

'Are those your customers?' I said and laughed at my own unfunny joke.

Military Uncle smiled back. He was in one of his rare good moods.

'These are pictures I took at the zoo. I scanned them to send to my grandson.'

'Cool. He likes animals?' I said and bent over to take a closer look at the chimp. It bore an uncanny resemblance to Bakshi.

'Yes, I'm sending them by email to my son. But I'm having trouble as our emails don't allow more than four-megabyte attachments.'

I decided to help Uncle. 'These are large files,' I said. 'I could try to zip them, though that won't compress images much. The other way is to make the pictures low resolution. Otherwise, you could leave a few animals out.'

He wanted to keep them high resolution, so we agreed to leave out the deer and the hippos as those weren't his grandson's favourite animals.

'Thanks so much, Shyam,' Military Uncle said, as I successfully pressed 'send' on his email. I looked at his face and there was genuine gratitude. It was hard to believe he had been booted out

because he was too bossy with his daughter-in-law—a piece of gossip Radhika had once passed on to me.

'You're welcome,' I said. I noticed Vroom signal to me to come back. Hoping the topic of Priyanka's wedding was over, I returned to the desk.

'Bakshi has sent us a copy of the proposal,' Vroom said.

I opened my inbox. There was a message from Bakshi.

I opened the mail to see who had been the original recipients. It was like a *Who's Who* of Western Computers and Appliances in Boston: the sales manager, the IT manager, the operations head and several others. Bakshi had sent it to the entire directory of people in our client base.

'He's copied in everyone. Senior management in Boston in the "To" field, and India senior management in the "cc" field,' I said.

'And yet somehow he forgot to copy us in,' Vroom said.

I read out the contents of his short mail:

> 'Dear All,
> Attached please find the much-awaited user manual of the customer service website that has altered the parameters of customer service at Western Appliances. I have only just completed this and would love to discuss it further on my imminent trip to Boston . . .'

I let out a silent whistle.

'Boston? Why is Bakshi going to Boston?' Vroom said.

The girls heard us. 'What's he going to Boston for?' Esha said.

'To talk about our website. Must have swung a trip for himself,' I said.

'What the hell is going on here anyway? On the one hand we're downsizing to save costs, on the other hand there's cash to send idiots like Bakshi on trips to the US?' Vroom said and threw his stress ball on the table. It hit the pen stand, spilling the contents.

'Careful,' Esha said, sounding irritated as a few pens rolled towards her. She had her mobile phone in her hand; she was still trying to call someone.

I was about to close Bakshi's message when Vroom stopped me.

'Open the document,' Vroom said, 'just open the file he sent.'

I opened the file containing our user manual. 'It's the same file we sent him. The user manual,' I said and scrolled down. As I reached the bottom of the first page, my jaw dropped, partly in horror and partly in preparation for some major cursing.

Western Computers Troubleshooting Website
User Manual and Project Details
Developed by Connexions, Delhi

Subhash Bakshi
Manager, Connexions

'Like f--k it's the same,' Vroom said, his eyes fixed on my screen. 'It says it's by Subhash Bakshi.' He tapped his finger on my monitor. 'Check this out. Mr Moron, who can't tell a computer from a piano, has created this website and this manual. Like crap he has.' Vroom banged his fists on the table.

'What is wrong with you?' Esha said.

She got up and went to the conference room, desperately shaking the phone to get a connection.

'He passed off our work as his, Shyam. Do you realise that?' he said.

I stared numbly at the first page of our, or rather Bakshi's, manual. This time he had surpassed himself. My head felt dizzy and I fought to breathe.

'Six months of work on this manual alone,' I said and closed the file. 'I never thought he'd stoop this low.'

'And?' Vroom said.

'And what? I don't really know what to do. I'm in shock. And on top of all this, there's the fear he may downsize us,' I said.

'Downsize us?' Vroom said and stood up. 'We've worked on it for six months, man. And all you can say is we can't do anything as "he may downsize us"? That loser Bakshi is turning *you* into a loser. Priyanka, tell him to say something. Go to Bakshi's office and have it out with him.'

Priyanka looked up at us, and for the second time that night our eyes met. She had that look; that same gaze that used to make me feel so small. Like what was the point of even shouting at me.

She shook her head and gave a wry smile. I knew that wry smile, too, like she'd known this was coming all along. I had the urge to shake her. It's easy to give those looks when you have a Lexus waiting for you, I wanted to say. But I didn't say anything. Bakshi's move had hurt me—it wasn't just the six months of toil, but that the prospects for my promotion were gone. And that meant—poof!—Priyanka was gone, too.

'Are you there, Mr Shyam?' Vroom said. 'Let's email all the recipients of this message and tell them what's going on.'

'Just cool down, Vroom. There's no need to act like a hero,' I snapped.

'Oh really? So, who should we act like? Losers? Tell us, Shyam, you should be the expert on that,' Vroom said.

Anger choked me. 'Just shut up and sit down,' I said. 'So you want to send another email to tell them about the infighting going on here? Who are they going to believe? Someone who's on his way to Boston for a meeting or some frustrated agent who claims he did all the work? Get real, Mr Malhotra. You'll get fired and that's it.' I was so caught up in the argument I didn't even notice Radhika standing next to me with a bottle of water in her hand.

'Thanks,' I said and took a few noisy sips.

'Feeling better?' Radhika said.

I raised my hand to stop her from saying more. 'I don't want to talk about this any more. This is between Bakshi and us. And I don't need the opinions of random people whose lives are just one big party.' I sat down and glared at Vroom.

He opened a notepad and drew a two-by-two matrix.

'What is that?' I said.

'I think I've finally figured Bakshi out. Let me explain with the help of a diagram,' Vroom said.

'I'm not in the mood for diagrams,' I said.

'Just listen,' Vroom said as he labelled the matrix.

On the horizontal axis he wrote 'good' and 'evil' next to each box. On the vertical axis, he wrote 'smart' and 'stupid'.

'OK, here is my theory about people like Bakshi,' Vroom said. 'There are four kinds of bosses in this world, based on two dimensions: a) how smart or stupid they are, and b) whether they are good or evil. With extreme good luck you get a boss who is smart *and* a good human being. However, Bakshi falls into the most dangerous category. He is stupid and he is evil,' Vroom said. 'We've underestimated him. He's like a blind snake: you feel sorry for it, but it still has a poisonous bite. He is stupid, hence the call centre is so mismanaged, but he is also evil, so he'll make sure all of us go down instead of him.'

I shook my head. 'Forget it. Destiny has put an asshole in my path.'

'Sorry to interrupt your discussion, guys,' Radhika said, 'but I hope you weren't talking about me when you mentioned people whose lives are one big party. My life is not a party, my friend. It really isn't—'

'It wasn't you, Radhika. Shyam most clearly meant me,' Priyanka interrupted.

'Oh forget it,' I said and stood up. I moved from the desk, just to get away from everyone.

2.10 a.m.

As I walked away from the WASG desk, my mind was still in turmoil. I felt like chopping Bakshi up into little bits and feeding them to every street dog in Delhi. I approached the conference room to find the door was shut. I knocked and waited for a few seconds before opening the door.

Esha was sitting on one of the conference-room chairs. Her right leg was bent and resting on another chair as she examined the wound on her shin. She held a blood-tipped knife in her hand and I noticed a used Band-Aid on the table. There was fresh blood coming out of the wound on her shin.

'Are you OK?' I said, moving closer.

Esha turned to look at me with a blank expression.

'Oh, hi, Shyam,' she said in a calm tone.

'What are you doing here? And your wound is bleeding, do you want some lotion or a bandage?' I said and looked away. The sight of blood nauseates me. I don't know how doctors show up to work every day.

'No, Shyam, I like it like this. With lotion it may stop hurting,' Esha said.

'What?' I said. 'But you want to stop the pain, don't you?'

'No.' Esha smiled sadly. She pointed to the wound. 'This pain takes my mind away from the real pain. Do you know what real pain is, Shyam?'

I had no idea what she was on about, but I knew that if she didn't cover the wound up soon, I'd throw up my recently consumed chocolate cake.

'I don't know, what is it?' I said.

'Real pain is mental pain,' Esha said.

'Right,' I said, trying to sound intelligent. I sat down on a chair next to her.

'Ever felt mental pain, Shyam?'

'I don't know if I have. I'm shallow, you see. There are lots of things I don't feel.'

'Everyone feels pain, because everyone has a dark side to their life. Something you don't like about yourself, something that makes you angry or that you fear. Do you have a dark side, Shyam?'

'Oh, let's not go there. I have so many, like half a dozen dark sides. I am a dark-sided hexagon,' I said.

'Ever felt guilt, Shyam? Real, hard, painful guilt?' she said.

'What's happened, Esha?' I said, as I finally found a position that allowed me to look at her face but avoid a view of her wound.

'Do you promise not to judge me if I tell you something?'

'Of course,' I said. 'I'm a terrible judge of people anyway.'

'I slept with someone,' she said and sighed, 'to win a modelling contract.'

'What?' I said, as it took me a second to figure out what she meant.

'Yes, my agent said this man was connected and I just had to sleep with him once to get a break in a major fashion show. Nobody forced me, I chose to do it. But ever since, I've felt this awful guilt. Every single moment. And the pain is so bad that this wound in my leg feels like a tickle,' she said and took the knife to her shin where she started scraping the skin around her wound.

'Stop it, Esha, what are you doing?' I said and snatched the knife from her. 'Are you insane? You'll get tetanus or gangrene or whatever other horrible things they show on TV in those vaccination ads.'

'This is tame. I'll tell you what's dangerous. My own brain, the delusional voice that says I have it in me to become a model. You know what the man said afterwards?'

'Which man?' I said as I shoved the knife to the other side of the table.

'The guy I slept with—a forty-year-old designer. He told my agent I was too short to be a catwalk model,' Esha said. 'Like the bastard didn't know that before he slept with me.' She began crying. I don't know what's worse, a shouting girl or a crying one. I'm awful at handling either. I placed my hands on Esha's shoulders, ready for a hug in case she needed it.

'And that son of a bitch sends some cash as compensation afterwards,' she said, sobbing. 'Give me the knife back, Shyam.'

'No, I won't. Listen, now I'm not really sure what to do in this situation, but just take it easy,' I said.

'I hate myself, Shyam. I just hate myself. And I hate my face, and the stupid mirror that shows me my face. I hate myself for believing people who told me I could be a model. Can I get my face altered?'

I don't know of any plastic surgeons who specialise in making

pretty girls ugly, so I kept quiet. After ninety seconds she stopped crying and took a tissue from her bag and wiped her eyes.

'Shall we go? They must be waiting,' I said.

'Thanks for listening to me,' Esha said. Only women think there is a reason to thank people when someone listens to them.

2.20 a.m.

To my disgust, Priyanka's wedding was still the topic of discussion when Esha and I returned to the bay. Esha sat down quietly.

'I'm taking mother-in-law tips from Radhika,' Priyanka said. 'I'm so not looking forward to that part. She seems nice now, but who knows . . .'

'C'mon, you're getting so much more in return. Ganesh is such a nice guy,' Radhika said.

'I'd take three mothers-in-law for a Lexus. Bring it on, man,' Vroom said.

Radhika and Priyanka started laughing.

'I'll miss you, Vroom,' Priyanka said, still laughing, 'I really will.'

'Who else will you miss?' Vroom said and all of us fell silent.

Priyanka shifted on her seat: Vroom had put her on the spot. 'Oh, I'll miss all of you,' she said, diplomacy queen that she is when she wants to be.

'Don't wish for three mothers-in-law, Vroom. It would be like asking for three Bakshis,' said Radhika. 'Or at least it can be for some women.'

'So your mother-in-law is evil?' Vroom said.

'I never said that. But she did say those things to Anuj. What will he think?'

'Nothing. He won't think anything. He knows how lucky he is to have you,' Priyanka said firmly.

'It's hard sometimes. She isn't my mum, after all.'

'Oh, don't go there. I can get along with anyone else's mum better than my own. My mum's neurosis has made me mother-in-law proof,' Priyanka said, and everyone on the desk laughed. I didn't, though, as there's nothing funny about Priyanka's mum to me.

'Anuj will be OK now, right? Tell me, guys: he won't hate me?' Radhika said.

'No.' Priyanka got up and went to Radhika. 'He loves you, he will be fine.'

'D'you want to check if he's OK?' Vroom said. 'I have an idea.'

'What?' Radhika said.

'Let's play radio jockey,' Vroom said. Radhika was baffled.

'I'll call Anuj and pretend I'm calling from a radio show. Then I'll tell him he's won a prize, a large bouquet of roses and a box of Swiss chocolates which he can send to anyone he loves with a loving message. So then, we'll all get to hear the romantic lines he has for you.'

'C'mon, it will never work,' Priyanka said. 'You can't sound like a DJ.'

'Trust me, I'm a call-centre agent. I can be a convincing DJ,' Vroom said.

I was curious to see how Vroom would do.

'OK,' Vroom said as he got ready. 'It's show time, folks. Take line five, everyone, and no noise. Breathe away from the mouthpiece, OK?'

Radhika gave him the number and Vroom dialled Anuj's mobile.

We glued the earpieces to our ears. The telephone rang five times then we heard someone pick up.

'Hello?' Anuj said in a sleepy voice.

'Hello there, my friend, is this 98101 46301?' Vroom said in an insanely cheerful, DJ's voice.

'Yes, who is it?' Anuj said.

'It's your lucky call for tonight. This is DJ Max calling from Radio City 98.5 FM, and you, my friend, have just won a prize.'

'Radio City? Are you trying to sell me something?' Anuj said.

'No, my friend, I'm not selling anything. I'm just offering you a small prize from our sponsor Interflora and you can request a song, too, if you want to. Man, people doubt me so much these days,' Vroom said.

'Sorry, I just wasn't sure,' Anuj said.

'Max is the name. What's yours?' Vroom said.

'Anuj.'

'Nice talking to you, Anuj. Where are you right now?'

'Kolkata.'

'Oh, the land of sweets, excellent. Anyway, Anuj, you get to send a dozen red roses, with your message, to anyone in India. This service is brought to you by Interflora, one of the world's largest flower delivery companies.'

'And I don't pay anything? Thanks, Interflora,' Anuj said.

'No, my friend, no payment at all. So do you have the name and address of your special person?'

'Yes, sure. I'd like to send it to my girlfriend, Payal.'

I think the earth shook beneath us. I looked at Vroom's face: his mouth was open and he was waving a hand in confusion. 'Payal?'

'Yes, she's my girlfriend. She lives in Delhi. She's a modern type of girl, so please make the bouquet fashionable.'

Radhika couldn't stay silent any longer. 'Payal? What did you just say, Anuj? Your girlfriend?'

'Who's that . . . ? Radhika . . . ?'

'Yes, Radhika. Your wife, Radhika.'

'What's going on here? Who is this Max guy, hey, Max?' Anuj said.

I think the Max guy just died. Vroom put his hand on his head.

'You talk to me, you asshole,' Radhika said, probably cursing for the first time since she'd got married. 'What message were you going to send this Payal?'

'Radhika, honey, listen, this is a prank. Max? Max?'

'There is no Max. It's Vroom here,' Vroom said in a blank voice.

'You bastar—' Anuj began before Radhika cut the line. She sat back down on her chair, stunned. A few seconds later she broke down in tears.

Vroom looked at Radhika. 'Damn, Radhika, I am so sorry,' he said.

Radhika didn't answer, she just cried and cried. In between, she lifted the half-knitted scarf to wipe away her tears. Something told me Radhika would never finish the scarf.

Esha held Radhika's hand. Maybe the tear bug passed through their hands because Esha started crying as well. Priyanka went to fetch some water, then Radhika cried a glassful of tears, and drank the glass of water.

'It's probably a misunderstanding,' Priyanka said. She looked at Esha, puzzled as to why she was so upset. I guessed Esha's 'real pain' was back.

Radhika rifled through her bag looking for her headache pills. She could only find an empty blister pack, cursed silently and threw it aside.

'Radhika?' Priyanka said.

'Just leave me alone for a few minutes,' Radhika said.

'Girls, I really need to talk,' Esha said as she wiped her tears away.

'What's up?' Priyanka said as she looked at Esha. They exchanged glances: Esha used the female telepathic network to ask Priyanka to come to the toilet. Priyanka tapped Radhika's shoulder and the girls stood up.

'Now where are you girls going?' Vroom said. 'I created this situation. Can't you talk here?'

'We have our private stuff to discuss,' Priyanka said firmly to Vroom and left the desk.

'What's up with Esha?' Vroom said to me after the girls were out of sight.

'Nothing,' I said.

'Come on, tell me, she must have told you in the conference room.'

'I can't tell you,' I said and looked at my screen. I tried to change the topic. 'Do you think Bakshi expects us to prepare for his team meeting?'

'I think Esha is feeling sorry for having said no to me.'

I smirked.

'Then what is it?'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'Fine. I'll use our earlier technique. I'm going to the toilet to find out,' Vroom said.

'No, Vroom, no,' I said, trying to grab his shirt, but he pulled away and went to the men's room. I didn't chase after him. I didn't care if he found out. I figured he ought to know what his love interest was up to anyway.

With no one at the desk and the systems down, I decided to take a walk around the room. I passed by Military Uncle's station and noticed him slouched at his desk.

'Everything OK?' I said. Military Uncle raised his head. I looked at his face: his wrinkles seemed more pronounced, making him look older.

'My son replied to the email I sent,' he said. 'I think the file was too big.'

'Really? What did he say?' I said.

Military Uncle shook his head and put it back on the desk. The message on his screen caught my eye.

> Dad, You have cluttered my life enough, now stop cluttering my mailbox. I do not know what came over me that I allowed communication between you and my son. I don't want your shadow on him. Please stay away and do not send him any more emails.

'It's nothing,' Uncle said, as he closed all the windows on his screen. 'I should get back to work. What's happened? Your systems are down again?'

'A lot is down tonight, not just the systems,' I said and returned to my seat.

2.25 a.m.

'Did you know Esha's big, bad story?' Vroom whispered when he returned.

'I'd rather not discuss it. It's her private matter.'

'No wonder she won't go out with me. She needs to romp her way to the ramp, doesn't she? Bitch.'

'Mind your language,' I said, 'and where are the girls?'

'Coming back soon. Your chick was consoling Radhika when I left.'

'Priyanka is not my chick, Vroom. Will you just shut up?' I said.

'OK, I'll shut up. That is what a good call-centre agent does, right? Crap happens around him and he just smiles and says, "How can I help you?" Like someone's just slept with the one girl I care for, but it's OK, right? Pass me the next dumb customer.'

I saw the girls on their way back to the desk. 'The girls are coming. Pretend you know nothing about Esha.'

The desk was silent as the girls took their seats. The Systems guy finally showed up with new kick-proof wires and reinstalled our systems. I was relieved as calls began to trickle in. Sorting Americans' oven and fridge problems was easier than solving our life problems.

I looked over at Priyanka once; she was busy with a caller. 'My chick.' I smirked to myself at Vroom's comment. She was no longer my chick. She was going to marry a rich, successful guy. But had I given up? Did I still feel for her? I shook my head at the irrelevant questions. What did it matter if I still felt something for her? I didn't deserve her and I wasn't going to have her. That was reality and, as is often the case with me, reality sucks.

The landline telephone's ring caught everyone's attention.

'This is my call. I know the system is live, but can I take it?' Priyanka said.

'Sure. The call flow is so light anyway,' Vroom said.

Priyanka's hand reached for the telephone. I casually switched the option on my screen to listen in to the conversation.

'Hello, my centre of attention,' Ganesh's beaming voice came over the phones.

'Hi, Ganesh,' Priyanka said sedately.

'What's up, Priya? You sound serious,' Ganesh said.

'Nothing. Just having a rough day . . . sorry, night. And please call me Priyanka,' she said. Priyanka hates it when people shorten her name to Priya.

'Well, I'm having a rocking day. Everyone in the office is so excited. They keep asking me, "So when is the date?" and "Where is the honeymoon?"'

'Yeah, Ganesh, about the date,' Priyanka said, 'my mum's just called.'

'She did. Oh no. I thought I'd give you the good news myself.'

'What good news?'

'That I'm coming to India next month. Let's get married then and have our honeymoon straight from there. People say the Bahamas is amazing, but I've always wanted to go to Paris. What could be more romantic than Paris?'

'Ganesh,' Priyanka said, her voice frantic. 'Can I say something?'

'Sure. But first tell me, Paris or the Bahamas?'

'Paris. Now can I say something?' Priyanka said.

Esha and Radhika raised their eyebrows when they heard the word Paris. It wasn't difficult to guess that honeymoon planning was in progress.

'Sure. What do you want to say?' Ganesh said.

'Don't you think it's a little rushed?'

'What?'

'Our marriage. We've only talked to each other for a week. I know we've spoken quite a bit, but still.'

'You've said yes to me, right?' Ganesh said.

'Yes, but . . .'

'Then why wait? I don't get much leave here, and considering I now spend my every living moment thinking about you, I'd rather bring you over at the earliest opportunity.'

'But this is marriage, Ganesh, not just a vacation. We have to give each other time to prepare,' Priyanka said.

'But,' Ganesh said, 'you've spoken to your mother, right? You heard how happy she is about us getting married next month. My family is excited as well. Marriage is a family occasion, too, isn't it?'

'I know. Listen, maybe I'm just having a rough night. Let me sleep on it.'

'Sure. Take your time. But have you thought of a colour?'

'For what? The car?'

'Yeah, I'm going to pay the deposit tomorrow so it's here when you arrive, assuming you agree to next month,. of course.'

'I can't say. Wait, I heard dark blue mica is nice.'

'Really? I kind of like black,' Ganesh said.

'Well then, take black. Don't let me—' Priyanka said.

'No, dark blue mica it is. I'll tell the dealer it's my wife's choice.'

The words 'my wife' sizzled my insides the way they fry French fries at McDonald's. I couldn't bear to hear another man talk like this to Priyanka.

'Hey, Ganesh, it's two twenty-five a.m. here. I have to get ready for a two-thirty meeting with the boss. Can we talk later?' Priyanka said.

'Sure, I'll call you when I get home from work, OK?'

'Bye, Ganesh.' Priyanka hung up.

'I heard Paris,' Esha said as she filed her nails.

'Yes, as a honeymoon destination. And, of course, more pressure to get married next month. I don't want to, but I just might have to give in.'

'Well, if it means seeing Paris sooner rather than later . . .' Esha said and looked over at us. 'Right, guys?'

'Sure,' Vroom said. 'What do you think, Shyam?'

Stupid ass, I hate Vroom.

'Me?' I said as everyone looked round. I didn't want to come across as a sulker—or childish, my new tag for the night—so I responded. 'Might as well get it done. Then go to Paris or the Bahamas or whatever.'

Damn. I kicked myself as the words left my mouth. Priyanka looked at me and her nose twitched as she thought hard.

'What did you just say, Shyam?' Priyanka said slowly.

'Nothing,' I said. 'I just said get married and go to Paris sooner.'

'No, you also said the Bahamas. How did you know Ganesh mentioned the Bahamas?' she asked.

I kept quiet.

'Answer me, Shyam. Ganesh also suggested the Bahamas, but I didn't tell that to you guys. How did you know what he said?'

'I don't know anything. I just randomly said it,' I replied.

'Were you . . . listening to my conversation? Shyam, have you played around with the phone?' Priyanka said and got up. She lifted the landline phone and pulled it away from the table. The wire followed her. She looked down under the table and tugged at the wires again. A little wire tensed up all the way back to my seat. Damn, busted, I thought.

'Shyam!' Priyanka screamed at the top of her voice.

'Yes,' I said as calmly as possible.

'What is going on here? I cannot believe you could sink so low. This is the height of indecency,' she said.

At least I'd achieved the heights in something, I thought. Radhika and Esha looked at me. I threw up my hands, pretending to be ignorant of the situation.

Vroom stood and went up to Priyanka. He put his arm round her shoulder, 'C'mon, Priyanka, take it easy. We're all having a rough night.'

'Shut up. This is insane,' she said and turned to me. 'How could you tap into my personal calls? I could report this and get you fired.'

'Then do it,' I said, 'what are you waiting for? Get me fired. Do whatever.'

Vroom looked at Priyanka and then at me. Realising there wasn't much he could do to help, he returned to his seat.

'What the . . . he . . .' Priyanka said, anger and impending tears showing in her voice. 'Can't one expect just a little decency from our colleagues?'

I guess I was just a colleague now. An indecent colleague at that.

'Say something,' Priyanka said to me.

I stayed silent and disconnected the tapped wire. I showed her the unhooked cable and threw it on the table. Our eyes met. Even though we were silent, our eyes communicated. My eyes asked, Why are you humiliating me? Her eyes said, Why are you doing this, Shyam? I think eye-talk is more effective than word-talk. But Priyanka was in no mood to be silent.

'Why, Shyam, why? Why do you do such childish, immature things? We said we would continue to work together, and that just because we'd ended our relationship, it didn't mean we had to end our friendship. But this . . .?' she said and lifted the wire on the table, then threw it down again.

'Sorry,' I said, or rather whispered.

'What?' she said.

'Sorry,' I said, this time loud and clear. I hate it when she does this to humiliate me. If you've heard an apology, just accept it.

'Do me a huge favour. Stay out of my life, please. Will you?' Priyanka said, her voice heavy with the sarcasm she had picked up from me.

I looked up at her and nodded.

Vroom sniggered. A smile rippled over Esha and Radhika as well.

'What's so funny?' Priyanka said, her face red.

'It's OK, Priyanka. C'mon, can't you take it in a bit of good humour?' Vroom said.

'Your humour isn't funny to me at all.'

'It's two thirty, guys,' Esha said, 'time to go to Bakshi's office.'

Priyanka and I gave each other one final glare before we got up to leave.

'Is Military Uncle needed?' Esha said.

'No. Just the voice agents,' I said. I looked at Military Uncle at the end of the room. I could see he was busy at the chat helpline.

'Let's go,' Vroom said.

'You OK, Radhika?' I said.

'Yes, I'm fine. I'm surprised that I am. I think I must be in shock. My husband is cheating on me. What am I supposed to do? Scream? Cry? What?'

'Do nothing for now. Let's just go to the meeting,' Vroom said.

My brain was still fumbling with Priyanka's words. Every moment of our last date was replaying itself in my mind as I walked to Bakshi's office. We had gone to a Pizza Hut, and pizzas have never tasted the same since.

My Past Dates with Priyanka—V
Pizza Hut, Sahara Mall, Gurgaon: Four months earlier

She arrived on time that day. After all, she had a purpose. This wasn't a date: we were meeting to formally break up. She also wanted to discuss how we were to interact with each other and move forward. Pizza Hut was convenient.

'Hi,' she said. 'How are you?' She held her shirt collar and shook it for ventilation. 'I can't believe it's so hot in July.'

'It's Delhi. What else do you expect?' I said.

The waiter came and took our order. I ordered two separate small cheese and mushroom pizzas.

'I'm not good at this break-up stuff, so let's not drag this out,' I said. 'So now what? Is there a break-up line I'm supposed to say?'

She stared at me for two seconds. 'Well, I just thought we could do it in a pleasant manner. We can still be friends, right?' she said.

What is it with women wanting to be friends for ever? Why can't they make a clear decision between a boyfriend and no-friend?

'I don't think so. Both of us have enough friends.'

'See, this is what I don't like about you. That tone of voice,' she said.

'I thought we decided not to discuss each other's flaws today. I have come here to break up, not to get an analysis of my behaviour.'

She kept silent until the pizzas arrived. I bit into a slice.

'Perhaps you forget that we work together. That makes it a little more complicated,' Priyanka said. 'If there's tension between us it will make it difficult to focus on work—for us and for the others,' she said.

'So what do you suggest? Should I resign?' I said.

'I didn't say that. Anyway, I'm only going to be at Connexions for another nine months. Then I will have saved enough to fund my B.Ed. If we can agree to certain terms and conditions, if we can remain friendly in the interim—'

'I can't force myself to be friendly,' I interrupted her. 'I can't fake it.'

'I'm not telling you to fake it,' she said.

'Good. Because you are past the stage of telling me what to do. Now, let's just get this over with. What are we supposed to say? I now pronounce us broken up?' I pushed my plate away. I'd completely lost my appetite.

'What? Say something,' I said. She had gone silent for ten seconds.

'I don't know what to say,' she said, her voice cracking.

'Really? No words of advice, no last-minute preaching, no moral high ground in these final moments for your good-for-nothing unsettled boyfriend? Come on, Priyanka, don't lose your chance to slam the loser.'

She collected her bag and stood up. She took out a 100 rupee note and put it on the table—her contribution for the pizza.

'OK, she leaves in silence again. Once again I get to be the prick,' I mumbled, loud enough for her to hear.

'Shyam,' she said, slinging her bag onto her shoulder. 'You know how you always say you're not good at anything? I don't think that's true, because there is something you are very good at,' she said.

'What?' I said. Perhaps she wanted to give me some last-minute praise to make me feel better, I thought.

'You are damn good at hurting people. Keep it up.'

With that, my ex-girlfriend turned round and left.

2.30 a.m.

We reached Bakshi's office at 2.30 a.m. The size of a one-bedroom flat, it's probably the largest unproductive office in the world. His desk is in one corner, and behind the desk is a shelf full of thick management books. The thought of slamming one hard on Bakshi's head had often crossed my mind.

At another corner of the room is a conference table and six chairs,

and in the centre of the table is a speakerphone for multiparty calls.

Bakshi was not in his office when we got there. We sat round Bakshi's conference table.

'Where the hell is he?' Vroom said.

'Maybe he's in the toilet?' I said.

'Executive toilet, it's a different feeling,' Vroom said. He stood up. 'Hey, want to check out Bakshi's computer?' He walked over to Bakshi's desk.

'What?' I said. 'Are you crazy? He'll be here any minute.'

'Do you want to know what websites Bakshi visits?' Vroom said and opened up Internet Explorer to pull out the history of visited websites.

'Have you gone nuts? You'll get into trouble,' I said.

'OK, I've just fired a print-out,' Vroom said. He fetched the print-out from Bakshi's printer and leapt back to the conference table.

'OK, guys, check this out,' Vroom said as he held the A4 sheet in front of him. 'Timesofindia.com, rediff.com, and then we have *Harvard Business Review* website, Boston places to see, Boston real estate—'

'What's with him and Boston?' Esha said.

'He's going there on a business trip soon,' Radhika reminded her.

'There are more. Aha, here's what I was looking for: awesome-india.com—the best porn site for Indian girls—cabaretlounge.com—a strip club in Boston—porn-inspector.com—hello, the list goes on in this department.'

'What's with him and Boston?' I repeated Esha's words.

'Who knows?' Vroom said and laughed.

We heard Bakshi's footsteps and Vroom quickly folded up the sheet of paper. We turned quiet and opened our notebooks to fresh blank pages.

Bakshi took quick steps as he entered his office.

'Sorry, team. I had to visit the computers bay team leaders for some pertinent managerial affairs. So, how is everyone doing tonight?' Bakshi said as he took the last empty seat at his conference table.

No one responded. I nodded my head to show I was doing fine.

'Team, I've called you today to tell you about a few changes that are about to take place at Connexions. We need to rightsize people.'

'So, people are getting fired; it wasn't a rumour,' Vroom said.

Radhika's face turned white. Priyanka and Esha looked shocked.

'We never want to fire people. But we have to rightsize sometimes.'

'Why are we firing when clearly there are things we can do?' Vroom said.

'We have carefully evaluated all the plausible and feasible alternatives, I'm afraid,' Bakshi said and took out a pen. We retreated nervously. The last thing we needed was another Bakshi diagram.

'Cost-cutting is the only alternative,' Bakshi said and began to draw something. However, his pen wasn't working, despite his attempts to shake it into action. Bakshi continued to lecture us. He spoke nonstop for six minutes, going into various management philosophies. His point was that we should make the company more efficient. He just didn't have an efficient way to say it.

Vroom had promised he wouldn't mention the website to Bakshi, at least until the layoffs were over. However, this didn't stop him from taking him on.

'Sir, but cost-cutting is useless if we have no sales growth. We need more clients, not nonstop cuts until there's no company left,' Vroom said after Bakshi had finished his lecture. I guess somewhere within him was a die-hard optimist who really thought Bakshi would listen to him.

'A sales force is too expensive,' Bakshi said.

'Sir, we can create a sales force. We have thousands of agents. I'm sure some of them are good at selling. We talk to customers every day, so we know what they want . . .'

'But our clients are in the US, we have to sell there.'

'So what? Why don't we send some agents to the US to try and increase our client base. Why not, guys?' Vroom said and looked at us,

I was the only one listening, but I remained quiet. Radhika was doodling on her pad. Priyanka was making a table of numbers on her notepad. Esha was digging the nib of her pen deep into hers.

'Send agents to the US? Move them to Boston?' Bakshi laughed.

'Well, a few of them, at least on a trial basis. Some of them are really smart. Who knows, they may get that one client that could save a hundred jobs. Right, Shyam?' Vroom said.

'Huh?' I said, startled to hear my name.

'Mr Victor, as a feedback-oriented manager I appreciate your input. However, I don't think it's such a good idea,' Bakshi said.

'Why not?' Vroom demanded with the innocence of a school kid.

'Because if it was such a good idea, someone would have thought of it before. Why didn't it strike me, for instance?' Bakshi said.

'Huh?' Vroom said, completely flabbergasted. I'd heard it all before so it didn't move me.

'What's the plan, sir, when do we find out who gets fir—I mean rightsized?' I said.

'Soon. We're finalising the list, but we'll let you know by this morning or tomorrow night,' Bakshi said, looking relieved that I hadn't challenged him.

'How many people will lose their job, sir? What percentage?' Radhika said, her first words in the meeting.

'Thirty to forty is the plan, as of now,' Bakshi said in a calm voice.

'That's hundreds of people,' Vroom said. As if it was a difficult calculation.

'Such is corporate life, my friend,' Bakshi said and got up, indicating that the meeting was over. 'You know what they say: it's a jungle out there.'

The girls stood up. 'Thank you, sir,' Esha said.

'You're welcome. As you know, I am an ever-approachable manager. Here or in Boston, you can contact me any time.'

We were at the door when Priyanka asked a question.

'Sir, are you going to Boston soon?'

Bakshi was back at his desk. 'Oh yes, I need to tell you, I'm transferring to Boston soon. Maybe in a month or so.'

'Transferring?' Vroom, Radhika, Esha, Priyanka and I all spoke together.

'Yes. I don't like to blow my own trumpet, but it seems they have recognised my contribution to the value-addition cycle of the company,' Bakshi said, a smug smile sliding across his shiny face. 'But details will come later. Anyway, if you don't mind, I need to make a call. I'll keep you posted.'

Bakshi signalled us to shut the door as we left. As I closed it, I felt like someone had slapped my face. We walked slowly away from his office.

2.45 a.m.

When we returned to the WASG bay after our meeting, calls were flashing on the screen, but no one attended to them. I sat at my seat and opened my email. I couldn't read anything—my mind was having a systems overload.

Vroom sat at his desk and mumbled inaudible curses. He opened the internal web page of Connexions on his computer. It had the map of the US on it. He held up a pen and tapped at a point on the US east coast.

'This is Boston,' he said and clenched his fist tight round the pen. 'This is where our boss will be while we are on the road looking for jobs.'

Everyone stayed quiet.

'I think we should start picking up a few calls,' I said.

'Like f--k we should,' Vroom said and jabbed his pen hard at the monitor. A loud ping startled everyone. Shattered glass made a nine-inch-wide spider's web pattern on Vroom's monitor, while the rest of his screen contined to work.

'What happened?' the girls said and came round to Vroom's computer.

'Damn it,' Vroom said, throwing his pen on the ground.

'Oh no. The monitor is totally gone,' Esha said. She put her hand on Vroom's shoulder. 'Are you OK?'

'Don't you dare touch me, you slut,' Vroom said, pushing her hand away.

'What?' Esha said. 'What did you just say?'

'Nothing. Just leave me alone, all right? Go and pray for your job or whatever. Bloody bitch will be a hooker soon.'

The girls stood there, stunned. Then, slowly, they walked back to their seats.

'What's wrong with him?' Priyanka asked Esha in an audible whisper.

'Maybe he's not taking my rejection so well,' Esha said to Priyanka.

'Oh really?' Vroom shouted. 'You think this is about that? Like I don't know about your escapades. Everyone knows. You thought I wouldn't find out? I wish I'd known before I proposed to a slut who'll bang for bucks.'

Esha looked at all of us, shocked, and tears appeared in her eyes. She started shaking and Radhika helped her sit down.

Priyanka went up to Vroom's seat and stared at him, her face red. Slap! She deposited a hand across Vroom's face.

'Learn how to talk to women. You say one more nasty thing and I'll screw your happiness, understand?' Priyanka said.

Vroom stared at Priyanka, his hand covering his cheek. He was too shocked to retaliate. I inserted myself between the two of them.

'Guys, can we have some peace here?' I said. 'Things are already messy. Please let's sit down and get some work done.'

'I can't work. I don't know if I'll still have a job in a few hours,' Priyanka said. 'I want him to apologise to Esha. The idiot has to watch what he says.'

Esha continued to cry as Radhika tried to console her.

'What do you care about a job? You're getting married. Women have it easy,' Vroom said.

'Don't you start that with me now,' Priyanka said. 'You think this is easy?' She pointed at Esha and Radhika. 'Radhika has found out her husband is cheating on her when she works for him and his family day and night, and Esha can't get a fair break unless she sleeps with creepy men. But they aren't breaking monitors and yelling curses, Vroom. Just because we don't make a noise doesn't mean it's easy,' she said at the top of her voice.

Radhika gave Esha a glass of water and she stopped crying.

Vroom looked at the shattered glass on his desk. 'I'm sorry,' he mumbled.

'What?' Esha said.

'I'm sorry, Esha,' Vroom said, clearing his throat. 'I said horrible and hurtful things. I was upset about something. Please forgive me.'

'It's OK, Vroom. It only hurts because there's some truth in it,' Esha said.

'I meant to say those horrible things to myself. Because,' Vroom said and banged his fists on the table, 'because the real hooker is me, not you.'

'What?' I said.

'Yes, this salary has hooked me. Every night I come here and let people f--k me,' Vroom said and picked up the telephone headset. 'And the funny thing is, I let them do it. For money, for security, I let it happen.' Vroom threw the headset on the table.

'Do you want some water?' Radhika said and handed him a glass.

Vroom took it and drank the contents in one gulp. 'Thanks,' he said. 'I needed that. I need a break, otherwise I'll go mad. I can't take this right now.'

'I need a break, too,' Priyanka said. 'It's all right, Vroom. Only a few more hours left and the shift will be over.'

'No. I want a break now. I want to go for a drive. C'mon, people, let's all go for a drive. I'll get the Qualis,' Vroom said and stood up.

'Now? It's close to three a.m.,' I said.

'Yes, now. Who gives a damn about the calls? You may not even have a job soon. Let's go.'

'Actually, if someone is going, can you please get some pills for me from the twenty-four-hour chemist?' Radhika said.

'No, all of us are going,' Vroom said.

I paused for a second. 'OK, let's go. But we have to be back soon,' I said.

'Where are we going?' Esha said. 'The new lounge bar Bed is close by.'

'No way, we're just going for a drive,' I said, but Vroom interrupted me.

'Great idea. Let's go to Bed; it's a damn cool place.'

We decided to leave individually to prevent suspicion.

'Come on, Military Uncle,' Vroom said as he went to his desk.

'Huh?' Uncle said, getting up. Normally he would have scoffed at Vroom, but I guess he was in too much pain over his son's email to give a conscious reaction.

'We're all going for a drive. The others will tell you everything. I'll get the Qualis,' Vroom said and switched off Uncle's monitor.

AT 3.00 A.M. SHARP, we were outside the main entrance of Connexions when a white Qualis drove up and stopped beside us.

'Get in,' Vroom said, reaching over to open the doors.

'It's so cold. What took you so long?' Esha said, getting in the front.

'You try shifting a sound-asleep driver to another Qualis,' Vroom said.

Radhika, Priyanka and I took the middle row, while Military Uncle sat by himself at the back. He looked slightly dazed. Maybe we all did.

Vroom started the engine and turned towards the exit gate. The highway was empty apart from a few trucks. India has a billion people, but at night, 99 per cent of them are fast asleep. Then this land belongs to a chosen few: truck drivers, late-shift workers, doctors, hotel staff and call-centre agents. We, the nocturnal, temporarily rule the roads and the country.

'Chemist first, please,' Radhika requested, massaging her head.

Vroom took a sharp right turn to a twenty-four-hour chemist. A sleep-deprived boy, no more than seventeen, manned the shop. A few medical entrance exam guides lay on the counter in front of him. He looked bored and grateful to see us.

Vroom and Radhika got out of the Qualis. I stepped out to stretch my legs as well.

Radhika walked up to the boy quickly and said, 'Three strips of

Fluoxetine, and five strips each of Sertraline and Paroxetine. Urgently, please.' She began to tap on the counter anxiously, her red bangles jingling.

The boy looked at Radhika, then started rifling through the shelves. He returned with a stack of tablets and placed them on the counter. Radhika reached out to grab them, but he put his right hand on top of the pile of medicines and slid them away from her. 'This is pretty strong stuff, madam. Do you have a prescription?' he asked.

'It's three in the morning,' Radhika said in an irritated voice. 'I ran out of pills at work. Where the hell do you expect me to find a prescription?'

'Sorry, madam. It's just that sometimes young kids come here to pick up strange medicines before going to discos . . .'

'Look at me,' Radhika said, 'do I look like a teenager in the mood to party?'

Radhika did not look like a party-hard teenager to me—she looked ill, with dark circles under her eyes.

'But these are still very strong drugs, madam. What do you need them for? I mean, what's wrong with you?' the boy said.

Radhika banged her fist hard on the glass counter. The glass shook but survived the impact. 'You want to know what's wrong with me, you little punk?' she said.

'Calm down, Radhika,' I said, but she didn't hear me.

'Everything is wrong with me, you moron. My husband is shagging some bitch while I slog my guts out. Happy now?' Radhika said, her face red. She grabbed the medicines. The boy at the counter didn't protest this time.

'Water. Can I have some water?' Radhika said.

The boy ran to the back of the shop and returned with a glass of water.

Radhika tore a few pills out of her new stack. One, two, three—I think she popped in three of them. Some migraine cure this was, I thought.

'Four hundred and sixty-three rupees, madam,' the boy said, his voice sounding a little fearful.

'I am alive because of this stuff. I need it to survive, not to party,' Radhika said.

She paid for the medicines and walked back to the Qualis. Vroom and I followed a few steps behind her.

'What sort of medicine is it?' I said.

'What the hell do I know? I'm not a doctor,' Vroom said.

'Everything OK?' Esha said as we got into the Qualis. 'We heard arguing.'

'Nothing. As Bakshi would say, only a few communication issues. But now, let's get to Bed,' Vroom said as he turned the Qualis round. He pushed the Qualis to one hundred and ten.

'Slow down, Vroom,' Esha said.

'Don't use the words slow and Vroom in one sentence,' Vroom said.

'Sorry, guys,' Radhika said, her voice becoming more normal as the drugs took effect. 'I apologise for creating a scene back there.'

'What did you buy? Why did the chemist make such a fuss?' I said.

'Antidepressants. Chemists ask questions because they're prescription drugs, but most of the time they don't care.'

'Wow!' Vroom said. 'You mean happy drugs like Prozac and stuff?'

'Yes, Fluoxetine is Prozac. Except it's the Indian version, so it's cheaper.'

'But it's dangerous to take it without medical supervision,' Priyanka said. 'Isn't it addictive?'

'It's legal addiction. I can't live without it and, yes, it's really bad for you. But it's still better than having to deal with my life.'

'Leave them, Radhika, they'll harm you,' Military Uncle said.

'I have cut down, Uncle. But sometimes you need a bigger dose. Can we just talk about something else? How far is this Bed place?'

'Just two kilometres from here. Ninety seconds if I'm driving, a lot more if Shyam is,' Vroom said. I ignored his comment, as I preferred him to keep his eyes on the road.

'I heard Bed is really snooty,' Priyanka said. 'I'm not dressed up at all.' She adjusted her salwar kameez. I noticed the border of glittering stone-work on her dark green chiffon dupatta.

'You look fine,' Esha reassured her, 'the chiffon look is really in. I should be worried. I look so grungy.'

'Well, if you girls are in doubt, they definitely won't allow in a boring housewife like me,' Radhika said.

'Don't worry. As long as we've got cash to spend, we'll all be welcome. Plus, the DJ at Bed is my classmate from school,' Vroom said.

'All your school classmates have such funky jobs,' I said.

'Well, that's the problem: they all have rich dads. I have to work hard to match their lifestyle. If only my dad hadn't walked out on us,' Vroom said. 'Anyway, guys, welcome to Bed.' He flashed the headlights at a sign. It said 'Bed Lounge and Bar: Your Personal Space'.

3.30 a.m.

We followed Vroom towards the huge black door that was the entrance to Bed. An ultra-beefy bouncer and a skinny woman stood beside it.

'Are you a member, sir?' the underfed woman addressed Vroom. She was the hostess—or door-bitch, as Priyanka called them.

'No, we've just come for a quick drink,' Vroom said.

'I'm sorry, sir, tonight is for members only,' she replied. The bouncer looked at us with a blank, daft glare.

'How do you become a member?' I said.

'You have to fill in a form and pay the annual membership fee of fifty thousand,' the hostess said, as calmly as if she'd asked us for small change.

'What? Fifty grand for this place in the middle of nowhere?' Priyanka said and pointed her finger to the door.

'I suggest you go somewhere else then,' the hostess said. She looked at Priyanka scornfully. A fully clad female is a no-no at discos.

Vroom turned to the bouncer. 'What's the deal? Is DJ Jas inside? I know him.' The bouncer looked at us anxiously. It was obviously the most challenging question anyone had asked him in months.

'You know Jas?' the hostess said, her voice warmer now.

'School buddy of seven years. Tell him Vroom is here,' Vroom said.

'Cool. Why didn't you tell me that before, Vroom?' the hostess said and flashed him a flirtatious smile. She leaned over to release the velvet ropes.

'Can we go in now?' Esha asked the hostess in a monotone.

'Yes. Though, Vroom, next time, please tell your friends to dress up for Bed,' the hostess said and glanced meaningfully at Priyanka and Radhika.

'I could wring her tiny neck. One twist and it would snap like a chicken bone,' Priyanka said as we walked inside.

The interior design of Bed was a cross between *Star Trek* and a debauched king's harem, illuminated by ultraviolet bulbs and candles. As my eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness I noticed two rows of six beds. Only five were occupied, so I couldn't understand the big fuss at the entrance. I guess it's never easy to get people into bed. We chose a bed in the corner.

'Why is the hostess so nasty?' Esha said as she hoisted herself onto it. She took two cushions to rest her elbows on. 'Did you hear her? "Go somewhere else." Is that how you treat customers?'

'They're paid to be nasty. It gives the place attitude,' Vroom said carelessly.

'I want a job that pays me to be nasty. All they tell us in the call centre is, "Be nice, be polite, be helpful", but being mean is so much more fun,' Radhika said, reclining along one of the cushions. For someone who had just had a tough night she looked good. I wondered how Anuj could cheat on her.

Vroom went to say hi to DJ Jas and returned with twelve kamikaze shots. Military Uncle declined, and Vroom took Uncle's extra shots and drank them in quick succession.

We had barely finished when a woman came up to us with another six drinks. 'Long Island Iced Teas,' she said, 'courtesy of DJ Jas.'

'Nice. You have friends in the right places,' Radhika said as she started gulping her Long Island like it was a glass of water.

'These Long Islands are very strong,' I said after a few sips. I could feel my head spin. 'Easy, guys, our shift isn't over. We said one quick drink, so let's make our way back soon.'

'Just one last drink,' Vroom said, ordering more cocktails.

'I'm feeling high,' Priyanka said. 'I'm going to miss this. I'm going to miss you guys.'

'Yeah, right. We'll see when you move to Seattle.'

There were two flat LCD screens in front of our bed, one tuned to MTV and the other to CNN. A Bollywood number was being played on MTV, as part of its 'Youth Special' programme. The news breaking on CNN was about the US invasion of Iraq. I noticed Vroom staring at the news.

Vroom pointed to a US politician who had spoken out in support of the war. 'Look at him. He'd nuke the whole world if he could have his way.'

'No, not the whole world. I don't think they'd blow up China,' Priyanka said, sounding high. 'They need the cheap labour.'

'Then I guess they won't blow up Gurgaon either: they need the call centres,' Radhika said.

'So we're safe,' Esha said. 'Welcome to Gurgaon, the safest city on earth.'

The girls started laughing and even Military Uncle smiled.

'It's not funny, girls. Our government doesn't realise this, but Americans are using us. We're sacrificing an entire generation to service their call centres,' Vroom said, convincing me that one day he could be a politician.

'C'mon, Vroom. Call centres are useful to us, too,' Esha said. 'You know how hard it is to make fifteen grand a month outside. And here we are, sitting in an air-conditioned office, talking on the phone, collecting our pay and going home. What's wrong with that?'

'An air-conditioned sweatshop is still a sweatshop,' Vroom said.

'Then why don't you leave? Why are you still here?' I said.

'Because I need the money,' Vroom said. 'And I agree the money is good. But we don't have jobs that allow us to show our potential.'

'So? What other kinds of jobs are there?' Esha said.

'Well, we should be building roads for a start. Power plants, airports, phone networks, metro trains. And if the government moves its rear end in the right direction young people in this country will find jobs. Hell, I would work day and night for that, as long as I knew that what I was doing was helping build something for my country's future. But the government doesn't believe in doing any real work, so they allow these Business Process Outsourcing places to be opened and think they have taken care of the youth. Just like stupid MTV thinks showing a demented chick dancing will turn the programme into a youth special. Do you think they really care?'

'Who?' I said. 'The government or MTV?' I got up and signalled for the check . . . in bars you always ask for the "check", never the "bill". It was 3.50 a.m. and I had had enough of Vroom's lecture. I wanted to get back to the call centre soon.

Vroom paid the bill with his credit card and we promised to split it later. The door-bitch and the bouncer gave us a puzzled look as we walked out.

4.00 a.m.

Vroom drove us away from Bed and we were soon back on the highway. Every now and then the Qualis would sway to the left or right of the road.

'Careful,' Esha said. 'You OK, Vroom?'

'I'm fine. Man, I love driving,' Vroom said dreamily.

'I can drive if you—' I said.

'I said I'm fine,' Vroom interrupted in a firm voice. 'Did you like Bed?' he said, to change the topic from his inebriated state.

'Great place,' Esha said. 'Hey, Vroom, have you got any music?'

'Of course. Let me see,' Vroom shuffled through the glove box. He took out a tape and held it up. '*Musafir Lounge*?' he asked.

'No,' Priyanka and I replied at the same time.

'Come on, guys. You two not only hate each other, you hate the same things, too?' Vroom said and smiled. He put the tape in and turned on the music. A song called 'Rabba' started playing.

I was sitting next to Priyanka. With every beat of the song, I could feel her body along my entire right side, like soft electric sparks. I had the urge to grab her hand, but restrained myself. I opened the window for some fresh air. I was worried about the next song. It was 'Mahi Ve', which would bring back memories of the 32nd Milestone parking lot.

I saw Priyanka's face change from the corner of my eye. She looked nervous. Yes, this was going to be hard.

'I love this song,' Vroom declared as it filled the Qualis.

I pressed the rewind-and-play button in the privacy of my head. Every moment of that night at 32nd Milestone replayed itself. I recalled every second of her careful, slow and amazing lovemaking. I wished Priyanka had never left me. I wished my world were a happier place.

I turned to look outside. The breeze felt cold, particularly along two lines on my cheeks. I touched my face. Damn, I couldn't believe I was crying.

'Can we please close the window? It's ruining my hair,' Esha said.

I slid the window shut and I tried to keep my eyes shut as well, but I couldn't hold back the tears. I never realised I was such a wuss.

I looked at Priyanka. Maybe it was my imagination, but her eyes seemed wet too. She turned towards me and then quickly looked away. I couldn't bear to meet her eyes right now, and I certainly couldn't look at that nose.

Vroom pulled out two tissues from the tissue box in front and swung his arm back to hand them over to us.

'What?' I said.

'I have a rearview mirror. I can see everything,' he said.

'We can all see,' Radhika and Esha said together and burst out laughing.

'You keep driving, OK?' I said. I took the tissue on the pretext of wiping my nose, then wiped my eyes. Priyanka took one and swabbed her eyes, too.

Esha reached behind her seat and rubbed Priyanka's arm.

Priyanka composed herself and changed the topic. 'How far away are we?' she said.

I looked at my watch. 'It's past four a.m. How much further?'

'Around five kilometres from the call centre. I'm driving more slowly now. Do you want me to drive faster?'

'No,' we cried.

'We're going to be late. Bakshi will flip,' I said.

'I can take a short cut,' Vroom said. 'Next left there's an untarred road. It was made for construction projects. It cuts through some fields and saves us about two kilometres. I've used it before. Let's take it.'

After a kilometre, he took a sharp left.

'Ouch,' Esha said, 'you didn't tell us this road would be so bumpy.'

'Just a few minutes,' Vroom said. 'Actually the ground is wet today from yesterday's rain.'

We plunged on into the darkness of the unlit road, the headlights trying hard to show us the way. We passed fields and construction sites filled with cement, bricks and steel rods. In a few places there were deep holes as builders constructed the foundations for super-high-rise apartments.

'There, just one final cut through and we'll be back on the highway,' Vroom said, taking a sharp right.

Suddenly the Qualis skidded and slid down an inclined path.

'Careful,' everyone shouted, holding on to anything they could find. The Qualis went off the road into a slushy downhill patch. Vroom desperately tried to control the steering, but the wheels wouldn't grip the ground. The slope flattened out but the Qualis was still rolling forward, only slowing down when it hit a mesh of steel construction rods. Vroom braked hard, and the Qualis halted on the rods with a metallic clang, bounced twice and came to a stop.

'Damn!' Vroom said.

Everyone sat in stunned silence.

'Don't worry, guys,' Vroom said and started the ignition. The Qualis shook violently.

'Turn . . . off . . . the . . . ignition . . . Vroom . . .' I said. There was a floor of steel below us that was shaking.

Vroom's hands shook too as he turned off the engine. I think any alcohol in his body had evaporated in fear.

'Where are we?' Esha said and opened the window. She looked out and screamed, 'Oh no!'

'What?' I said and looked out again. This time I looked around more carefully. What I saw was terrifying: we had landed on a frame of exposed steel rods for reinforcing concrete that covered

the foundation hole of a building. The foundation consisted of a pit that was maybe fifty feet deep, and the rods were all that supported us above it. Every time we moved, the Qualis bounced, as the rods acted as springs. I could see fear in everyone's face, including Military Uncle's.

'We're hanging above a hole, supported only by toothpicks. We're screwed,' Radhika said, summing up the situation for all of us.

'What are we going to do?' Esha said, panic in her voice.

'Whatever you do, don't move,' Vroom said.

A few minutes passed where the only sound was the heavy breathing of six people.

'Should we call for help? The police? Fire brigade? Call centre?' Esha said as she took her mobile phone out of her bag.

Vroom nodded, naked fear showing on his face.

'Damn, no reception,' Esha said. 'Does anyone have a mobile that works?'

Priyanka and Radhika's cell phones didn't work either, Military Uncle didn't have a mobile, so Vroom took out his phone.

'No network,' he said.

I took out my phone from my pocket and gave it to Esha.

'Your phone isn't working either,' Esha said, placing it on the dashboard.

'So we can't reach anyone in the world?' Radhika said.

A rod snapped under us and the Qualis tilted a few degrees to the right. I fell towards Radhika; Vroom held the steering wheel tight to keep his balance. Another rod snapped, and then another. The Qualis tilted around thirty degrees and came to a halt. All of us were too scared to scream.

'Does anyone have any ideas?' Vroom said.

I closed my eyes for a second and visualised my death. My life could end, just like this, in oblivion. I wondered when and how people would find us. Maybe labourers the next day, or even after a couple of days.

SIX IRRESPONSIBLE DRUNKEN AGENTS FOUND DEAD would be the headline.

'Try to open the door, Vroom,' Military Uncle said.

Vroom opened his door, but the Qualis wobbled so he shut it immediately.

'Can't,' Vroom said. 'Messes up the balance. And what's the point? We can't step out, we'd fall right through. Move towards the left. No

weight on the right. We have to stay balanced until someone spots us in the morning.'

I checked my watch. It was only 4.14 a.m. The morning was three hours away. A lifetime. And people might turn up even later than that.

'Otherwise?' Esha said.

'Otherwise we die,' Vroom said.

We stayed quiet for a minute.

'Everyone dies one day,' I said, just to break the silence.

'Maybe it's simpler this way. End life rather than deal with it,' Vroom said.

I nodded. I was nervous and I was glad Vroom was making small talk.

'My main question is, what if no one finds us even after we die. What happens then?' Vroom said.

'The vultures will find us. They always do. I saw it on the Discovery Channel,' I said.

Beneath us there were two sharp 'pings' as another two rods snapped.

'Oh no,' Priyanka said as we heard another ping just below her. A flicker of light appeared on the dashboard. My cellphone was vibrating. We sprang to attention.

'That's my phone,' I said. It started ringing.

'How did it ring without a network?' Esha said, her voice nervous.

'Who is it?' Radhika said.

'Pick it up,' I said.

Esha lifted the phone. She looked at the screen and gasped.

'Who is it?' I said.

'Do you know someone called . . . God? It says God calling,' Esha said.

4.30 a.m.

Esha's fingers trembled as she pressed the button for speaker mode.

'Hi, everyone. Sorry to call so late,' a cheerful voice came from the phone.

'Er, who is it?' Esha said.

'It's God,' the voice said.

'God? God as in . . .' Radhika said as all of us looked at the brightly lit phone in fright.

'As in God. I noticed an unusual situation here, so I thought I'd just check on you guys.'

'Who is this? Is this a joke?' Vroom asked in a more confident voice.

'Why? Am I being funny?' the voice said.

'God doesn't normally call. Prove that you're God. Otherwise, you should get some help,' Vroom said.

'How do I prove I'm God? Do I create rain and lightning on demand? Or would you prefer a magic trick? A few special effects, maybe?' God said.

'Well, I don't know, but yeah, something like that,' Vroom said.

'So to impress you I have to break the very same laws of physics I created? I'm sorry, I'm not into that these days. And I have plenty of believers. I thought I could help, but I can hang up. See you then . . .' God said.

'No, no wait. Please help us . . . G . . . God,' Esha said and turned slightly so she could hold the cellphone between all of us.

'OK, I'll stay,' God said cheerfully. 'Tell me, how's it going? How's life?'

I'm very bad at tough, open-ended questions like that. I hate to admit the extent to which my life is screwed up.

'Well, right now we're trapped. If a few more rods break we'll all die,' I said and God interrupted me.

'Don't worry, the Qualis isn't going anywhere. Just relax.'

I let out a deep sigh. Everyone was silent.

'So back to the question, how's life going? Do you want to start, Radhika?' God said.

'If you are God you must already know everything. Life is miserable,' Radhika said.

'I *do* know,' God said. 'I just want to find out how you feel about it.'

'I'll tell you how we feel. Life suc—sorry,' Vroom said, checking himself. 'It's horrible. What have we done wrong? Why are our lives in the pits, literally and figuratively? That pretty much sums it up for all of us, I think.'

We all made noises of agreement and God sighed.

'Let me ask you a question. How many phone calls do you take each day?' God said.

'A hundred, on busy days two hundred,' Vroom said.

'OK. Now do you know which is the most important call in the world?'

'No,' Vroom said and we all shook our heads.

'The inner call,' God said.

'The inner call?' everyone said in unison.

'Yes, the little voice inside that wants to talk to you, but you can only hear it when you are at peace, and even then it's hard to hear. The voice that tells you what you really want. Do you know what I mean?'

'Sort of,' Priyanka said, her eyes darting away from the phone.

'That voice is mine,' God said.

'Really?' Esha said, her mouth wide open.

'Yes. And the voice is easy to ignore, because you are distracted or busy or just too comfortable in your life. Go on, ignore it—until you get tangled in your own web of comfort. And then when you reach a point like today, where life brings you to a dead end, there is nothing ahead but a dark hole.'

'You're making sense,' I conceded, more to myself.

'I know that voice. But it isn't subtle in me. Sometimes it shouts and bites me,' Vroom said.

'And what does the voice say, Vroom?' God said.

'That I should not have taken a job just for money. There are better jobs that pay less. Jobs that give me identity, make me learn or help my country. I justified it to myself by saying money is progress, but it's not true. Progress is building something that lasts,' Vroom said, sounding as if there was a lump in his throat. He pressed his face into his hands.

Esha put her hand on Vroom's shoulder.

'Come on, guys. This is getting far too sentimental. You can do a lot better than this. You are all capable people,' God said.

It was the first time someone had used the word 'capable' to describe me.

'We can?' I said.

'Of course. Listen, let me make a deal with you. I will save your lives tonight, but in return you must give me something. Close your eyes for three minutes. Think about what you really want and what you need to change in your life to achieve it. Then once you get out of here, *act* on those changes. Do as I say, and I will help you get out of this pit. Is that a deal?'

'Deal,' I said. Everyone nodded.

We closed our eyes and took a few deep breaths. I tried to concentrate, but all I could see was commotion. Priyanka, Bakshi, my promotion and Ganesh—my mind kept jumping from one topic to another.

'So, tell me,' God said after three minutes.

We opened our eyes. Everyone's faces seemed a lot calmer.

'Let's go around the Qualis one by one. Vroom, you first,' God said.

'I want to have a life with meaning, even if it means a life without Bed or daily trips to Pizza Hut. I need to leave the call centre for good. Calling is not my calling,' Vroom said.

I thought his last line was pretty clever, but it didn't seem like the right time to appreciate verbal tricks.

Priyanka spoke after Vroom. My ears were on alert.

'I want my mother to be happy. But I cannot kill myself for it. My mother needs to realise a family is a great support to have, but ultimately, she is responsible for her own happiness. My focus should be on my own life and what I want,' Priyanka said. I wished she had said my name somewhere in her answer, but no such luck.

Military Uncle's turn came after Priyanka, and he spoke for longer than I had ever heard him speak.

'I want to be with my son and my grandson. I miss them all the time. Two years ago I was living with them, but my daughter-in-law did things I didn't like—she went to late-night parties and got a job when I wanted her to stay at home . . . I argued with them before moving out. But I was wrong. It's their life and I have no right to judge them with my outdated values. I want to visit them in the US to talk it over.'

Radhika's turn came next. She was fighting back tears as she spoke. 'I want to be myself again, just as I was before I got married. I want to divorce Anuj. I don't ever want to look at my mother-in-law's face again. To do this, I have to accept that I made a wrong decision when I married Anuj.'

Esha spoke after Radhika. 'I want my parents to love me again. I don't want to become a stupid model. I'm sure I can find a better use for my looks. Any career that makes you compromise your morals is not worth it.'

People now turned to look at me as I was the only one left to speak.

'Can I pass?' I said. I was given an even harder stare.

'OK. This will sound stupid, but I want to take a shot at my own business. I had this idea: if Vroom and I collaborate, we could set up a web design company. It may never work, because most of the things I do never work, but—'

'What else, Shyam?' God said, interrupting me.

'Uh, nothing,' I said.

'Shyam, you are not finished, you know that,' God said.

I guess you can't outsmart God and I was being forced to come to the point. I looked around and spoke again.

'And I want to be worthy of someone like Priyanka one day. Today I don't deserve her, and I accept that—'

'Shyam, I never said—' Priyanka said.

'Please, let me finish, Priyanka. It's about time people stop trampling all over me,' I said.

Priyanka went silent. I could see she was in mild shock at my firmness.

I continued. 'But one day I'd like to be worthy of someone like her, someone intelligent, witty, sensitive and fun. And yes, I want to be successful, too.'

God stayed silent.

'God? Say something now that we've poured out our deepest secrets to you,' Esha said.

'I don't really have to say anything. I'm just amazed, and delighted, at how well you have done. Knowing what you want is already a great start. Are you prepared to follow it through?'

Everyone nodded except me.

'Are you ready, Shyam?' God said.

I gave a small nod.

'Shyam, may I say something personal in front of your friends,' God said, 'because it's important for everyone else, too?'

'Sure,' I said. Yeah, use me as Exhibit One for 'how not to live your life'.

'There are four things a person needs for success. One, a medium amount of intelligence, and two, a bit of imagination. And all of you have those qualities,' God said. 'But the third is what Shyam has lost.'

'What's that?' I said.

'Self-confidence. The third thing you need for success is self-confidence. But Shyam has lost it. He is convinced he is good for nothing.'

I hung my head.

'You know how you became convinced?' God said.

'How?' I said.

'Because of Bakshi. A bad boss is like a disease of the soul. If you have one for long enough you will become convinced something is wrong with you. Even when you know Bakshi is the real loser, you start doubting yourself, and that is when your confidence evaporates.'

God's words shook my insides like the vibrating Qualis had a few minutes earlier. 'God, I would like to get my confidence back,' I said.

'Good. Don't be scared and you will get it back, and then there'll be no stopping you.'

I felt the blood rush to my ears. My heart was beating hard and all I wanted was to be back at the call centre. Anger surged in me when I pictured Bakshi. I wanted to get even with the man who had killed a part of me, who had put everyone's job on the line, who had ruined the call centre.

'What's the fourth ingredient for success?' Vroom said.

'The fourth ingredient is the most painful. It is something all of you still need to learn. Because it is often the most important thing,' God said.

'What?' I said.

'Failure,' God said.

'But I thought you were talking about success,' Vroom said.

'Yes, but to be really successful, you must first face failure. You have to experience it, feel it, taste it, suffer it. Only then can you shine,' God said.

'Why?' Priyanka said.

'Once you've tasted failure, you will have no more fear. You'll be able to take risks more easily, you will no longer want to snuggle in your comfort zone, you will be ready to fly. And success is about flying, not snuggling.'

'Good point,' Priyanka said.

'So, never be afraid of failure. If it comes your way, it really means I would like to give you a proper chance later,' God said.

'Cool,' Priyanka said.

'Thank you,' God said.

'If only you had given as much to India as America,' Vroom said.

'Why, don't you like India?' God said.

'Of course. Just because India is poor doesn't mean you stop loving it. It belongs to me. But even so, America has so much more,' Vroom said.

'Well, Americans may have many things, but they are not the happiest people on Earth. Any country obsessed with war can't be happy,' God said.

'True,' Radhika said.

'And many of them have serious mental issues. Issues only call-centre agents know about. And you can use them to save your

call centre tonight. Yes. Consider their weak spots and you might win,' God said. 'Let me give you a clue. What exactly lies behind all this war sentiment?' God said.

'Fear. It's obvious, they are easily scared and paranoid people,' I said.

'We'll scare them into calling us. Yes, that's how to retrieve our call volume,' Vroom said, his voice excited.

'Now you're thinking. In fact, you can figure out a way to get even with Bakshi too. Not completely fair and square, but I think you deserve to be able to bend a few of the rules,' God said, and I thought I heard a chuckle.

We all smiled.

'Remember Bakshi is not your boss; your ultimate boss is me. And I am with you. So what are you afraid of?' God said.

'Excuse me, but you are not always there with us, otherwise how did we end up here?' Radhika said.

God sighed. 'I think you need to understand how my system works. You see, I have a contract with all human beings. You do your best, and every now and then I will come and give you a supporting push. But it has to start with you, otherwise how can I distinguish who most needs my help?'

'So if I listen to my inner call and promise to do my best, will you be there for me?' I said.

'Absolutely. But I have to go now. Someone else else is trying to reach me,' God said.

'Wait! Help us get out of this pit first,' Esha said.

'Oh yes, of course,' God said. 'OK, Vroom, you're balancing on a few rods now. There are two tricks to get out of such a situation. One, remember the reverse gear. And two, make friends with the rods—do not fight them. Use the rods as rail tracks and they will guide you out.'

Vroom stuck his neck out of the window. 'But these steel construction rods are as thin as my fingers. How can we bunch them up?'

'Tie them,' God said.

'How?' Vroom said.

'Do I need to tell you everything?' God said.

'Dupatta. Use my dupatta,' Priyanka said.

'Here, I have this half-knitted scarf in my handbag,' Radhika said.

'I think you can take it from here. Bye now. Remember, I am inside you when you need me,' God said.

'Bye, God,' the girls said one after the other.

'Bye, everyone,' God said and disconnected the call. Silence fell.

'What . . . was . . . that?' Priyanka said.

'I don't know. Can I have the dupattas, please,' Vroom said. 'Military Uncle, can you open the rear door and tie up the rods under the wheel. Tear up the dupatta if you want to.'

Vroom and Military Uncle tied up the rods right under the wheel for the Qualis to do its ten-foot journey to firm ground.

'OK, people,' Vroom sat back on the seat, wiping his hands, 'hold tight.'

Vroom started the ignition and the Qualis vibrated as the rods below us started quivering again.

'Vroom, I am sl . . . ipping,' Esha said, trying to grip the glove-box handle.

In a nanosecond, Vroom put the Qualis in reverse and drove backwards. The Qualis shook but we didn't fall. My upper and lower jaws chattered so hard I thought a couple of teeth would break loose. In six seconds, it was all over and we were out of the pit and on the slushy mud road again.

'It's over. I think I'm alive,' Vroom said with a grin of relief. He turned round. 'Are you still there?'

4.40 a.m.

We all released our breaths together. The girls hugged, and Vroom reached out and backslapped me so hard I thought I'd broken my back. He did a U-turn and drove slowly in first gear until we reached the highway.

'We made it,' Esha said and wiped away her tears. Priyanka folded her hands and prayed a few times.

'I thought we were going to die,' Radhika said.

'What was that call?' Esha said.

'Something very strange—can we make a pact not to talk about it?' I said. Everyone nodded, as if I had said exactly what was on all their minds. It was true. The call felt so personal I didn't want to discuss it any more.

'Whatever it was, we're OK now. And we'll be back in the office soon,' Priyanka said.

'It's still only four forty. We're just two kilometres away,' Vroom said. He soon regained his confidence and began driving at sixty kilometres an hour.

'I feel lucky to be alive, I don't care when we get there,' Esha said.

'I don't want to get back to find out about the layoffs. I'm leaving in any case,' Vroom said. 'Enough's enough.'

'What are you going to do?' Priyanka said.

'I don't know long-term—maybe get back into journalism. But as an immediate short-term goal, I'm going to try to save the call centre,' he said.

'Hey, d'you want to open a web design company with me?' I said.

'With you?' Vroom said, looking back at me.

'I'm leaving, too,' I said.

'Really?' Priyanka's eyes popped open. She looked at me as if a seven-year-old had just announced his decision to climb Mount Everest.

'Yes, I came close to death in that pit. I could have died there without ever having taken a risk in my life. I am tired of soft, comfortable options. It's time to face the real world, even if it's harder and more painful.'

Everyone nodded. I was taken aback; it seemed people were really listening to me for the first time.

'Plus, I've made one more promise to myself,' I said.

'What?' Vroom and Priyanka said together.

'I'm not going to work for an idiot any more, anywhere. Even if it means less money. I can't spend my life working for a moron.'

'Not bad,' Vroom said. 'Looks like Shyam has just wised up.'

'I don't know if I'm wise or not, but at least I've made a choice. We'll see what happens. For now I have a short-term goal, too.'

'Like what?' Vroom said, as he drove with utmost concentration.

'I have to take care of Bakshi. Since we have nothing to lose, let's teach him a lesson,' I said.

Vroom screeched the Qualis to a halt and we all fell forward.

'Now what?' I said.

'I've just had an idea for fixing Bakshi and the call centre at the same time,' Vroom said. He leaned back and whispered something in my ear.

'No way, I mean how?' I said.

'I'll tell you how when we get back. Let's meet in the WASG conference room,' he said and pressed the accelerator hard as we drove the final stretch to the centre. We entered the Connexions main gate at 4.45 a.m. Our driver was sleeping in another vehicle, so we parked quietly next to him.

'People, let's go—four forty-six,' Vroom said and jumped out of the car.

Back at our bay there was an A4-sized sheet stuck to my monitor with big bold letters scrawled on it.

'Check this out,' I said. It was Bakshi's writing.

> WHERE IS EVERYONE? PLEASE CALL/REPORT TO MY OFFICE ASAP. WHERE ARE THE COPIES OF THE AGENDA FOR MY BOARD MEETING? WHAT HAPPENED TO THE PHOTOCOPIER? AND AGENT VICTOR'S MONITOR?

Vroom looked at the note and laughed. 'Whatever. He'll get his answers. But first he'll answer us. Guys, conference room first,' Vroom said.

We filed inside the conference room and Vroom bolted the door.

'Guys, sorry to sound like an MBA type, but I think for the next few hours we have a three-point agenda to consider. One, to save this call centre, and two, to teach Bakshi a lesson. Agreed?'

'What's the third point?' Radhika said.

'That's between me and Shyam. It's private. OK, listen . . .'

And that is where Vroom revealed his plan. We jumped in our seats when we first heard it, but slowly Vroom convinced us. Between laughter and intense concentration, everyone joined in to refine the plan further. At 5.10 a.m., we concluded our meeting and left the WASG conference room.

'All set?' Vroom said.

'Of course,' we said.

'Good. Step One: Bringing Bakshi out of his office,' Vroom said. 'Esha, are you ready?'

'Yes,' Esha said and winked at us.

She picked up the phone, dialled Bakshi's number and put on the voice of an older woman.

'Sir, this is Elina calling from the main bay. There's a call for you from Boston, I think,' Esha said in a dumb-but-conscientious secretarial tone.

'No, sir, I can't seem to transfer it . . . Sir, I've already tried . . . Sir, I'm a new assistant here, so I'm still not sure how the phones work . . . Sir, sorry, but can you come down, sir . . . Yes, sir,' Esha said and hung up the phone.

'Did it work?' I said.

'He's a total sucker for anything to do with Boston. He's coming right now. But he'll only be out for a few minutes, so let's rush.'

5.15 a.m.

As planned, Bakshi's office was empty when we arrived.

Vroom went straight to Bakshi's computer and opened his email.

Radhika, Priyanka, Esha and I sat at his conference table. Vroom typed furiously on Bakshi's keyboard. I knew what we were doing was wrong, but somehow it felt good. Once he'd finished, Vroom printed out several copies.

'Five copies,' he said, 'one for each of us. Fold it and keep it safe.'

I folded my copy and put it in my shirt pocket.

Bakshi came in twenty seconds later.

'I can't believe we have such outdated telephone systems.' Bakshi was talking to himself as he came into his office, then he noticed us at the conference table.

'There you all are. Where were you? And what happened to the photocopier and agent Victor's monitor?' Bakshi said.

'Sit down for a second, will you, Bakshi?' Vroom said.

'What?' Bakshi said, shocked at Vroom referring to him by his name. 'You should learn how to address seniors—'

'Whatever, Bakshi,' Vroom said and put his feet up on Bakshi's meeting table.

'Agent Victor, what did you say and what exactly do you think you are doing?' Bakshi said, still standing.

'Ahh,' Vroom said, 'this is so much more comfortable. Why don't people always sit like this?' he crossed his skinny legs on the table.

'What the hell is going on here?' Bakshi said and looked at me blankly.

Vroom pushed a print-out towards Bakshi. 'Read it,' Vroom said.

The email read as follows:

From: Subhash Bakshi
To: Esha Singh
Sent: 05.04 a.m.
Subject: Just one night

Dear Esha,
Don't be upset. My offer is very simple—just spend one night with me. You make me happy—I'll protect you from the rightsizing operation. My pleasure for your security, I think it's a fair deal. And who knows, you might even enjoy it, too. Let me know your decision soon.
Your admirer, Bakshi

Bakshi's face turned white. 'What is this?' he said, his voice shaking.

'You tell us. It's an email from your inbox,' Vroom said.

'But I didn't write it,' Bakshi said, desperately, 'I did not write this.'

'Really?' Vroom said. 'Now how can you prove you didn't write it? Can you prove to the people in the Boston office that you didn't write it?'

'What are you talking about? How is this connected to Boston?' Bakshi said, his face spouting droplets of sweat through the oilfields.

'Let's see. What if we forward Boston a copy of this email? I'm sure they love employees who do, how did you put it? "fair deals",' I said.

'I did not write it,' Bakshi said, unable to think of a better line.

'Or we could send a copy to the police,' Vroom said, 'and to some of my reporter friends. You want to be in the papers tomorrow, Bakshi?' Vroom took out his phone. 'Oh wait, maybe I could even get you on TV.'

'TV?' Bakshi said.

'Yes, imagine the headline: CALL CENTRE BOSS ASKS GIRL FOR SEXUAL FAVOURS IN EXCHANGE FOR JOB. New Delhi TV could live on that for a week. Damn, I'd make a good journalist,' Vroom said and laughed.

'But what did I do?' Bakshi said and ran to his desk. He opened his email and checked the 'Sent Items' folder.

'Who wrote this?' Bakshi said as he saw the same email on his screen.

'You didn't?' Priyanka said as if in genuine confusion.

'Mr Bakshi, I held you in such high esteem. Today my faith in my role model is shattered,' Esha said and put her hands to her face. She was good—I thought she should try for an acting career.

'I swear I didn't write this,' Bakshi said, scrambling with his keyboard.

'Then who wrote it? Santa Claus? The tooth fairy?' Vroom shouted and stood up. 'Explain it to the police, journalists and to our Boston office.'

'Hah! Look, I've deleted it,' Bakshi said with a smug smile.

'Come on, Bakshi,' Vroom said, 'it's still in your "Deleted Items" folder.'

'Oh,' Bakshi said and jerked his mouse. A few clicks later he said, 'There, it's gone.'

Vroom smiled. 'One more tip for you, Bakshi. Go to your deleted

items, select the tools menu and choose the "Recover Deleted Items" option. The mail will still be there.'

Bakshi's face showed panic again as he tried to follow Vroom's instructions. He clicked his mouse over and over again.

'Oh, stop it, Bakshi. The mail is in my inbox as well. And Vroom has many print-outs,' Esha said.

'Huh?' Bakshi looked like a scared rabbit. 'You'll never get away with this. Esha, you know I didn't do it. You wear tight skirts and tops, but I only look at them from a distance. Even those jeans that show your waist, I only saw—'

'Stop right there, you sicko,' Esha said.

'You can't get away with this,' Bakshi said.

'We have five witnesses, Bakshi, and all of them will support Esha's testimony,' I said.

'Oh, and we have some other evidence as well. In Esha's drawer there is a packet full of cash, it has your fingerprints on it,' Vroom said.

Bakshi's fingers trembled as if he was getting ready to play the drums.

'We also have a print-out of your visits to porn websites,' Radhika said.

'You know it's not me, Esha. I'll be proven innocent,' Bakshi said, his voice sounding like a hapless beggar's. He looked as if he was about to cry.

'Maybe. But the amazing publicity will be enough to screw your career. Goodbye, Boston,' I said and waved my hand to indicate farewell.

Bakshi sat down. His white face had now turned red, or rather purple.

'Why are you doing this to me? I'll be leaving you for ever to go to Boston soon,' Bakshi said.

'Boston?' I said. 'You don't deserve a posting to Bhatinda. You're not just a bad boss, you're a parasite: to us, to this company, to this country. Damn you.'

'What do you want? Do you want to destroy me?' Bakshi said. 'I have a family and two kids. After a lot of effort my career is going fine. My wife wants to leave me anyway. Don't destroy me, I'm human too.'

I disagreed with Bakshi's last remark. I didn't think he was human at all.

'Destroying you is a good option,' Vroom said, 'but we have more worthwhile goals for now. I want to do a deal with you. We bury this issue and in return you do something for us.'

'What kind of thing?' Bakshi said.

'One, I want to have control of the call centre for the next two hours. I need to get on the Tannoy,' said Vroom.

'Why? Will you announce this email?' Bakshi said.

'No, you moron. It's to save jobs at the call centre. Can I use the Tannoy?'

'Yes. What else?'

'I want you to write out a resignation letter for Shyam and me. Layoffs or not, we are leaving Connexions.'

'Are you guys leaving right now?' the girls said.

'Yes. Shyam and I are going to start a small website design business. Right, Shyam?' Vroom said.

'Yes,' I said. Wow! I thought.

'Good. And this time, no one will take the credit for our websites except ourselves,' Vroom said and slapped Bakshi's face. Bakshi's face turned sixty degrees from the impact. He held his cheek but remained silent, apart from one tiny, dry sob. His facial expression had a combination of 90 per cent pain and 10 per cent shame.

'May I?' I said.

'Be my guest,' Vroom said.

Slap! I gave Bakshi's face a good slap too and it swung sixty degrees in the other direction.

'So you'll write the resignation letter, OK?' Vroom said.

'OK,' Bakshi said, rubbing his cheek. 'But Esha will delete the email, right?'

'Wait. We're not finished. Our business will require start-up capital, so we need a severance package of six months' salary,' Vroom said.

'I can't do six months. It's unprecedented for agents,' Bakshi said.

'New Delhi TV or *Times of India*, you pick,' Vroom said.

'Six months is possible. Good managers break precedents,' Bakshi said. I guess no amount of slaps could halt his jargon.

'Nice. Lastly, I want you to retract the rightsizing proposal. Ask Boston to postpone the layoffs to try a new sales-driven recovery plan for Connexions.'

'I can't do that,' Bakshi said.

Vroom lifted his mobile phone and put it in front of Bakshi's face.

'I'll make sure all of India knows your name by tomorrow,' Vroom

said. 'There are agents with kids, families, responsibilities. You can't just fire them.'

'Give me half an hour. I'll set up a call with Boston,' Bakshi said.

'Good. We'll bury the email. But make sure you get the hell out of this country as fast as you can. We need a new boss, a normal, decent, inspiring human being and not a slimy, bloodsucking goofball with a fancy degree.'

Bakshi nodded while continuously wiping the sweat from his face.

'Good. Anything else? Did you have something to ask me about my monitor?' Vroom said.

'Monitor? What monitor?' Bakshi said.

5.20 a.m.

Bakshi gave Vroom the key to the broadcast room and then got straight on the phone to Boston to arrange a management meeting. I had never seen him work so efficiently.

Vroom went to the broadcast room and switched on the mikes while I went to the main computer bay to check for sound quality.

'Hello, everyone. May I have your attention, please? This is Vroom, from the strategic group.' His voice echoed through Connexions and all the agents looked up at the speakers while still talking to their customers.

'Sorry to bother you, but we have an emergency. This is about the layoffs. Can you please disconnect all your calls,' the speaker said.

Everyone heard the word layoffs and a thousand calls ended at the same time. New calls flashed, but no one picked them up. Vroom continued:

'Idiots have been managing this place up until now and it's because of their mistakes that more than a third of you will lose your jobs tonight. It doesn't seem fair to me, does it seem fair to you?'

There was no response.

'Come on, guys, I want to hear you. Do I have your support to save your jobs and this call centre?'

The agents all looked at each other, still in partial disbelief. There was a weak 'yes'.

'Louder, guys, all together. Do I have your support?' Vroom said.

'Yes!' a collective scream rocked Connexions.

Vroom continued in a firmer voice. 'Thank you. My friends, I need your support. Tell me, are you ready to work hard for the next two hours?'

'Yes!' a collective voice came back as Vroom paused to take a breath.

'Good, then listen. This call centre will survive only if we can increase our call traffic, and my plan is to *scare* the Americans into calling us. Tell them that terrorists have hit America with a new computer virus that threatens to take their country down. The only way they can stay safe is to keep calling us to report their status. We'll do it like this: pull out every customer number you have and call them. I'll send you a call script on email in the next five minutes, but until then, dig out those numbers,' Vroom said.

Noise levels rose in the main bay as hundreds of localised conversations took place simultaneously. Nobody was sure if the plan would work, but people were willing to try anything to avoid losing their jobs.

Vroom and I returned to our bay. He typed furiously on his computer and after a few minutes tapped on my shoulder.

'Check your email,' Vroom said and pointed to my screen.

I opened my inbox. Vroom had sent the same email with a script to everyone in the call centre. It explained the problem with the virus and that customers could check to see if it had affected them by carrying out a simple MS Word test. They were asked to call in every four to six hours.

Vroom grinned and winked at me as I finished reading the email.

'What's with the MS Word trick?' I said.

'Try it, open a Word file,' Vroom said.

I opened an empty Word document and typed in =rand (200,99).

As soon as I pressed Enter, 200 pages of text popped out. It was spooky, and went something like this:

> The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. The quick brown . . .

'This is unbelievable. What is it?' I asked.

'It's a bug in MS Word. Nothing is perfect. Now just wait and watch,' Vroom said.

Vroom's email reached 1,000 mailboxes and agents read it immediately. Within minutes, agents were doing a job they knew only too well: calling people to deliver a message as fast as possible. I left my seat and passed by the main bay. I picked up random sentences from the conversations.

'Hello, Mr Williams, sorry to disturb you on Thanksgiving. I am calling from Western Computers with an urgent message. America is under a virus attack,' one agent said.

'Yes, sir. According to our records your computer has been affected . . .' said another.

'Just keep calling us. Every four to six hours,' said one as she ended the call.

The more aggressive agents went a step further: 'And I want you to tell all your friends and relatives. Yes, they can call us too.'

Some customers panicked and needed reassurance.

'No problem. We will save this country. The evil forces will never succeed.'

A thousand agents, four minutes to a call—we could do 30,000 calls in two hours. If they called us every six hours, we would have over 100,000 calls a day. Even if it only lasted a week, we would hit our targets for the next two months. Hopefully, with a new manager and extra sales effort, Connexions could be on its way to recovery, and no one would lose their job.

Vroom came looking for me in the main bay and we went back to WASG. Vroom signalled me into the conference room.

'The response is amazing. We've only been calling for thirty minutes and traffic is up five times already,' Vroom said.

'Rocking, man,' I said. 'But why've you called me here?'

'We have to discuss the third private agenda.'

'What's that?' I said.

'The third agenda is for you. Don't you want Priyanka back?'

'No, Priyanka and I are over,' I said.

'Be honest, dude. You spoke to God and everything.'

I looked down. Vroom waited until I said something.

'It doesn't matter if I want her or not. Look at my competition. How am I going to succeed against Mr Perfect Match Ganesh?'

'See, that's the problem. We all think he's Mr Perfect, but nobody is perfect.'

'Yeah, right. A house, a car that costs more than ten years of my salary, freaking working for the world's top company—I don't see much imperfection in that.'

'Everyone has a flaw, dude. The trick is to find a flaw in Ganesh.'

'Well, how are we ever going to do that? And even if we find a flaw in him, what's the point? He's so good, Priyanka will still go for him,' I said.

'At least she will know she isn't making the perfect trade-off,' Vroom said.

I remained silent for two minutes. 'Yes, but how do we find Ganesh's flaw?' I said and looked at my watch. It was 5.30 a.m.

'There must be a way,' Vroom said.

'The shift is over soon. What are you planning to do? Hire a detective in Seattle?' I said, my voice irritated.

'Don't give up, Shyam,' Vroom said and patted my shoulder.

'I'm trying to forget Priyanka, but if you search within me there is still pain. Don't make it worse, Vroom.'

'Wow, what drama. Search within me, there is pain,' Vroom laughed.

'Let's go back to the bay,' I said.

'Hey, wait a minute. You just said *search*.'

'Yes, search within me, there is still pain. Pretty cheesy, I know. Why?' I said.

'Search. That's what we can do. Google will be our detective. Let's do a search on his name and see what comes out. There may be a few surprises.'

'What? You want to do a search for Ganesh?'

'Yes, but we need his full name. Let's find out his college as well. I think he got his Masters in computers in the US,' he said. 'Come on, let's go.'

'Where?' I said, even as I let myself get dragged along.

'To the WASG bay,' Vroom said.

Priyanka was on the phone. After she had ended a call Vroom spoke to her.

'Hey, Priyanka, quick question. My cousin also did a Masters in computers in the US. Which college did Ganesh go to?'

'Huh? Wisconsin, I think,' she said.

'Really. Let me email my cousin and ask him if it's the same one. What's Ganesh's full name by the way?'

'Gupta. Ganesh Gupta,' Priyanka said as she prepared to make another call.

'Oooh. Mrs Priyanka Gupta,' Esha said, putting on a smart voice and laughing. Priyanka's new name sent ripples of pain down my rib cage.

'Cool. Keep calling,' Vroom said and went back to his seat.

As Vroom's monitor was broken, he took control of my computer. He searched for the following terms on google.com:

ganesh gupta drunk Wisconsin
ganesh gupta fines Wisconsin
ganesh gupta girlfriend

Several links popped out, but there was nothing we could make much sense or use of.

'Damn, what a boring guy. Let me try again,' Vroom said.

ganesh gupta fail
ganesh gupta party
ganesh gupta drugs

Nothing interesting emerged.

'Forget it, man. He was probably the head boy at school,' I said.

'You bet, one of those teacher's pet types,' Vroom said, letting out a frustrated breath. 'I give up. I'm sure if I type something like "ganesh gupta microsoft award" plenty of things will pop out, achiever that he is.'

More links popped out. We clicked through a few, and then we hit on one with his picture. It was Ganesh's online album.

'Damn, it is him, with his mates,' Vroom said and clicked on the link. 'Let's check out how ugly his friends are.'

The link opened to a web page titled 'Microsoft Award party photos'. The party was at Ganesh's house. Ganesh had won some developer award at Microsoft and a couple of his friends had come to his house to celebrate.

'Look at the slideshow,' I said as Vroom selected the option. We looked up once to confirm the girls were still busy with their calls.

As the picture flicked onto the screen we saw a garden party full of Indian people. On the tables there was enough food to feed a small town.

'Hey, I think we've found something. Check out our man,' Vroom said. He pointed to one of the photos in which Ganesh held a beer glass.

'What's the big deal?' I said. It was hardly scandalous to hold a glass of beer. Priyanka herself could knock back ten if they were free.

'Check out Ganesh's head,' Vroom said.

'What?' I said. I looked closer and then I saw it. 'Oh no,' I said.

Ganesh had a bald spot in the middle of his head. It was the size of a Happy Meal burger and had caught the camera's flashlight.

'Unbelie—' I said.

'Shhh!' Vroom said. 'Did you see that? He has perfect hair in the Statue of Liberty picture.'

'Are all his photos in this album like this?' I said.

'Yes, sir,' Vroom said and flicked through the slideshow. One boring picture after another followed, but wherever Ganesh was, so was the shiny spot.

Vroom reclined on his chair with a proud expression. 'As I said, sir, no one is perfect. Apart from Google, of course.'

I looked at the screen and back at Vroom. 'So, now what?' I said.

'Now we invite the ladies for a viewing,' Vroom said and grinned.

'No, that's not right . . .' I said, but it was too late.

'Esha, Radhika, Priyanka. Do you want to see some more Ganesh pictures? Come here quickly,' Vroom said.

The girls dropped their phone calls. Esha and Radhika stood up.

'What are you talking about?' Priyanka said and came over to us.

'The power of the Internet. We found an online album. Come and see what your new house is like,' Vroom said. He kept quiet about the shiny spot so that the girls could see it for themselves.

'Nice pad,' Esha said, 'but where's Ganesh? Let me guess,' she said and touched the monitor with her finger. 'Here, this one, no. But wait, he's a baldie. Is he the elder brother?'

Priyanka looked closer. 'No, that's Ganesh,' she said, her mouth open. I could sense that the wind had been knocked out of her sails.

'But I didn't notice the bald spot in the photo you showed us, Priyanka,' Esha said. Radhika squeezed Esha's arm. Esha stopped talking.

Priyanka began flipping through the images on the screen. She didn't notice, but her hair was falling on my shoulders as she bent over. It felt nice.

But Priyanka wasn't feeling nice. She brought out the Statue of Liberty picture and we looked at it again. Ganesh had perfect hair.

'Maybe the guy is Ganesh's elder brother,' Radhika said.

'No. Ganesh doesn't have a brother. He only has one sister,' Priyanka said, her face distraught at the fact that he had deceived her like that. Such a tiny lie could lead to bigger lies.

There was silence for a few seconds.

'Well, it doesn't really matter much, eh? What's a bit of smooth skin between the true love of two souls?' Vroom said. I clamped my jaws shut to prevent a laugh escaping. 'Let's go back, people, enough fun. Don't forget to keep calling,' Vroom said.

Priyanka retraced her steps in slow motion. She went back to her seat and took out her mobile phone. She dialled a long number, probably long distance. This call was going to be fun—I only wished I could tap into it.

'Hello, Ganesh,' Priyanka said in a direct voice. 'Listen, I can't talk for long. I just want to check on something . . . yes, just one question . . . actually I was just surfing the Internet . . .' Priyanka said and got up from her seat. She moved to the corner of the room where I could no longer hear her.

I made a few calls. Priyanka returned after ten minutes and tossed her cellphone on the desk.

Esha jiggled her eyebrows up and down, as if to ask, 'What's up?'

'It *is* him in the online pictures,' Priyanka said. 'He didn't have much to say. He said his mother asked him to touch up his hair slightly in the Statue of Liberty snap as it would help in the arranged marriage market.'

'Oh no,' Esha wailed.

'He apologised several times saying he'd been against tampering with the picture, but had to agree when his mother insisted.'

'Did the apologies seem genuine?' Radhika said.

'Yes, I think so. He said he understood how I must feel and that he was ready to apologise in front of my family as well.'

'Well, then it's OK. What difference does it make? You don't really care about him being bald, do you?' Radhika said. 'Practically all men become bald in a few years anyway. It's not like you can do anything about it then.'

'That's true,' Priyanka said in a mellow voice. I could see her relenting.

'Yeah, it doesn't matter. Just make sure he wears a cap at the wedding—unless you want to touch up all the wedding pictures,' Vroom said and chuckled. Esha and I looked down to suppress our grins.

'Shut up, Vroom,' Radhika said.

'Sorry, I'm being mean. Honestly, it's no big deal, Priyanka. No one's perfect, we all know that. So, let's get back to our calls.'

6.00 a.m.

For the next half-hour we focused on one activity: making calls to save Connexions.

At 6.30 a.m. I went up to the main bay. Team leaders huddled around me as they gave me the news. The incoming calls had already shot up, even though we hadn't expected the big boost for another six hours. Some customers had called us several times an hour.

Vroom and I went to Bakshi's office with some of the senior team leaders. He had arranged an urgent video conference call with the Boston office. Bakshi supported us as we presented the new call data, insights into the call traffic and potential new sources of revenue. After a twenty-minute video discussion, Boston agreed to a two-month reprieve before deciding on layoffs. They also agreed to evaluate the possibility of sending top team leaders on a short-term sales assignment to Boston.

Reassured that Connexions was safe for now, I returned to my desk while Vroom went outside to clean the Qualis before the driver woke up. I had told Vroom I wanted to slip away—no goodbyes, no hugs and no promises to meet, especially in front of Priyanka. Vroom agreed and said he would be ready outside with his bike at 6.50 a.m.

The girls stopped their calls at 6.45 a.m. Everyone began to log out so they could be in time for the Qualis, which would be waiting at the gate at 7.00 a.m.

'I'm so excited. Radhika is moving into my place,' Esha said.

'Really?' I said.

'Yes, I am,' Radhika said. 'And Military Uncle is going to recommend a lawyer friend. I need a good, tough divorce lawyer.'

'Don't you want to try and work it out?' Priyanka said.

'We'll see. I am in no mood to compromise. And I'm not going back to his house now, for sure. My mother-in-law will be making her own breakfast.'

'And after that, I'm taking Radhika to Chandigarh for the weekend,' Esha said and smiled.

Everyone was busy making plans. I excused myself on the pretext of going to the water cooler for a drink, so I could leave the office from there.

6.47 a.m.

I reached the water cooler and bent towards the tap to take my last drink at the call centre. As I finished, I stood up to find Priyanka behind me.

'Hi,' she said. 'Leaving?'

'Oh, hi. Yes, I'm going back on Vroom's bike,' I said and wiped my mouth.

'I'll miss you,' she said. 'I'm sorry about the way things turned out.'

'Don't be sorry,' I said, shaking my fingers dry. 'It's more my fault than yours. I understand that. I acted like a loser.'

'Shyam, you know how Vroom said just because India is poor it doesn't mean you stop loving it?' Priyanka said.

'What?' I blinked at the change of topic. 'Oh yes. And I agree, it is our country after all.'

'Yes, we love India because it's ours. But do you know the other reason why we don't stop loving it?'

'Why?'

'Because it isn't completely India's fault that we are behind. Yes, some of our past leaders could have done things differently, but now we have the potential and we know it.'

'Good point,' I said. I found it strange that she should talk about nationalism at what was possibly our last moment together.

I nodded and started walking away from her. 'Anyway, I think Vroom will be waiting . . .' I said.

'I applied the same logic to something else,' she said. 'I thought, this is the same as my Shyam, who may not be successful now, but it doesn't mean he doesn't have the potential, and it sure as hell doesn't mean I've stopped loving him.'

I stood there dumbstruck. I fumbled for words and finally spoke shakily:

'You know what, Priyanka? You say such great lines that even though I've tried to hate you all night, it's impossible. And I know I should hate you and that I should move on, because I can't offer you what Mr Microsoft can—'

'Ganesh,' she interrupted me. 'Not Mr Microsoft.'

'Yes, whatever,' I kept talking, without pausing to breathe. 'I can't offer you what Ganesh can. No way could I ever buy a Lexus. Maybe a Maruti 800 one day, but that's about it.'

She smiled. 'Really? An 800? With or without AC?' she said.

'Shut up. I'm trying to say something deep and you find it funny,' I said.

She laughed again, gently. I wiped a tear from my right eye and she raised her hand to wipe the tear from my left eye.

'Anyway, it's over between us, Priyanka, and I know it. I'll get over it soon. I know, I know,' I said, talking more to myself.

She waited until I had composed myself. I bent over to splash my face with water at the cooler. 'Anyway, where's your wedding going to be? Your mum will probably blow all her cash on a big gig,' I said, straightening up.

'In some five-star hotel, I'm sure. You'll come, won't you?'

'I don't know,' I said.

'What do you mean, you don't know? It'll be so strange if you aren't there.'

'I don't want to be there and feel sad. Anyway, what's so strange if I'm not there?'

'Well, it will be a little strange if the groom isn't there at his own wedding,' Priyanka said.

I froze as I heard those words, rewinding her last sentence three times in my head.

'What . . . what did you just say?' I said.

She pinched my cheek and imitated me: 'What . . . what did you just say?'

I stood there speechless.

'But don't think I'm going to let you go that easily. One day I want my 800 with AC,' she said and laughed.

'What?' I said.

'You heard me. I want to marry you, Shyam,' Priyanka said.

I thought I would jump for joy, but mostly I was shocked. And even though I wanted to hug, cry and laugh at the same time, a firm voice, like a guard inside me, asked, What's this all about? Hell, I didn't want pity.

'What are you saying, Priyanka? That you would choose me over Ganesh? Is this a sympathy decision?'

'My life's biggest decision can't be a sympathy decision. I've thought about it. Ganesh is great, but . . . the whole touching up of the photo bothers me. He's an achiever in his own right, so why did he have to lie?'

'So you're rejecting him because he's bald? My hair isn't reliable, either.' I said

'No. I'm not rejecting him because he's bald. Most men go bald one day, it's horrible, I know,' she said and ruffled my hair. 'He might be fine in most ways,' she continued, 'but the point is, he lied. And for me that's a clue as to what sort of person he is. I don't want to spend my life with a person like that. In fact, I don't want to spend my life with a person I don't know very well beforehand. That's one part of my decision. The other is the big part.'

'What?' I said.

'I love you. Because you are the only person in the world I can be myself with. And because you are the only person who knows all my flaws and still loves me completely. I hope,' she said, with a quivering voice.

I didn't say anything.

'And even if the world says I'm cold, there is a part of me that's sentimental, irrational and romantic. Do I really care about money? Only because people tell me I should. Hell, I prefer truck driver dhabas over five-star hotels. Deep inside, I am just a girl who wants to be with her favourite boy, because like you, this girl is a person who needs a lot of love.'

'Love? I need a lot of love?' I said.

'Of course you do. Everyone does. It's funny that we never say it. It's OK to scream, "I'm starving," if you are hungry; it's OK to make a fuss and say, "I'm so sleepy," if you are tired; but somehow we cannot say, "I need some more love." Why can't we say it, Shyam? It's just as basic a need.'

I looked at her. Whenever she delivers these deep, philosophical lines, I get horribly attracted to her. The guard inside reminded me to be firm.

'Priyanka?'

'Yes,' she said, sniffling.

'I love you,' I said.

'I love you, too,' Priyanka said.

'Thanks. However, Priyanka, I can't marry you. Sorry to say this, but my answer to your mind-blowing proposal is no,' I said.

'What?' Priyanka said as her eyes opened wide in disbelief. The guard inside me was in full charge.

'I can't marry you. I'm a new person tonight, and this new person needs to make a new life and find new respect for himself. You chose Ganesh, and he's fine. You have an option for a new life and you don't really need me, so maybe it's better this way,' I said.

'I still love you, Shyam, and only you. Please don't do this,' she said, coming closer to me.

'Sorry,' I said and moved three steps backwards. 'I can't. I'm not your spare wheel. I appreciate you coming back, but I think I'm ready to move on.'

She just stood there and cried. My heart felt weak, but my head was strong.

'Bye, Priyanka.' I gingerly patted her shoulder and left.

6.59 a.m.

'What the hell kept you?' Vroom said, sitting on his bike at the main entrance.

'Sorry, man, Priyanka met me at the water cooler,' I said and sank onto the pillion seat.

'And?' Vroom said.

'Nothing. Just goodbye and all. Oh, and she wanted to get back together and marry me, she said. Can you believe it?'

Vroom turned to me. 'Really? What did you say?'

'I said no,' I said coolly.

'What?' Vroom said.

As we were talking, Radhika, Esha and Military Uncle came out of the main entrance into the wintry sunshine.

'Hi, you guys still here?' Radhika said.

'Shyam just said no to Priyanka. She wanted to marry him, but he said no.'

'What?' Radhika and Esha spoke in unison.

'Hey, guys, chill out. I did what I needed to do to get some respect in my life. Stop bothering me,' I said.

The Qualis arrived and the driver pressed the horn.

'We aren't bothering you—it's your life. Let's go, Esha,' Radhika said and gave me a dirty look. She turned to Esha as they walked to the Qualis.

'Where's Priyanka, madam? We are late,' the driver said.

'She's coming. She's on the phone to her mother. Ganesh's parents are going over for breakfast and her mother is making hot parathas,' Radhika said, loud enough for me to hear.

The driver started the Qualis. Priyanka came dashing out of the main entrance, avoided me and went straight to the front seat. Then the driver turned the Qualis round.

As they began to move off, Military Uncle looked out from his window and said something. I could only lip-read but I thought he said, 'You bloody idiot.'

Before I could react, the Qualis was gone.

Vroom stubbed out his cigarette.

'Oh no. I *am* a bloody idiot. I let her go,' I said.

'Uh-huh,' Vroom said as he put on his helmet.

'Is that a yes? You think I am a total idiot?'

'You are your best judge,' Vroom said, as he dragged the bike with his feet.

'Vroom, what have I done? If she reaches home and has parathas with Ganesh's family, it is all over. I'm such a moron,' I said.

'Stop dancing around. I have to get going,' Vroom said.

'Vroom, we have to catch the Qualis. Can you go fast enough?'

Vroom removed his helmet and laughed.

'Are you insulting me? Do you doubt that I can catch that wreck of a Qualis? I am so hurt, man.'

'Vroom, let's go. Please,' I said and pushed his shoulders.

'No. First you apologise for doubting my driving abilities.'

'I'm sorry, boss, I'm sorry,' I said. 'Now move, Schumacher.'

Vroom kick-started his bike, and in a few seconds we had zipped out of the call centre. The main road was getting busier as the morning progressed, but Vroom still managed a top speed of ninety. On the road into the city, we dodged cars, scooters, autos, school buses and newspaper hawkers.

Four minutes later, I noticed a white Qualis at a distant traffic signal.

'It must be that one,' I pointed out.

Just as Vroom moved ahead, a herd of goats decided to cross the road and fifty of them blocked our way.

'Damn, where did they come from?' I said.

'This urban jungle of Gurgaon was a village until recently; the goats are probably asking where did *we* come from,' Vroom said.

'Shut up and do something,' I said.

Vroom tried to move his bike, but bumped into a goat's horns. He considered taking the right side of the road where traffic flowed in the opposite direction, but it was full of trucks and we'd have been mowed down in seconds.

'There's only one option,' Vroom said and smiled.

'Wha—' I said as Vroom lunged his bike up onto the road divider. 'Are you crazy?' I said.

'No, you're crazy to let her go,' Vroom said and started riding along the divider. The goats and drivers looked over at us in shock. Vroom dodged round the streetlights until we'd passed the herd, and once we were back on the road he accelerated to 100. One minute later our bike was level with the Qualis at a red light. I got off and tapped the front window. Priyanka looked away, so I banged the glass with my palm.

She opened the window. 'What is it? We don't want to buy anything,' Priyanka said as if I was a roadside vendor.

'I'm an idiot,' I said.

'And?' Priyanka said.

Everyone in the Qualis rolled down their windows to look at me.

'I'm a moron. I'm stupid, insane and nuts. Please, I want us to be together.'

'Oh really? What about the new man who needs respect?' Priyanka said.

'I didn't know what I was saying. What does one do with respect? I can't keep it in my pocket,' I said.

'So you want to keep me in your pocket?' Priyanka said.

'You're already in every pocket—of my life, my heart, my mind, my soul—please come back. Will you come back?' I said as the light turned yellow.

'Hmm. Let's see . . .' Priyanka said.

'Priyanka, please answer fast.'

'I don't know. Let me think. Meet me at the next red light, OK? Let's go, Driver *ji*,' she said as the light turned green. The driver took off at full speed.

'What did she say?' Vroom said as I sat on the bike.

'She'll answer at the next red light. Let's go.'

There was a mini traffic jam at the next red light, so I got off the bike and ran past a few vehicles to reach the Qualis. I tapped the window again but Priyanka wasn't there.

'Where is she?' I asked the driver, who shrugged his shoulders at me.

I looked inside the Qualis. Radhika and Esha shrugged their shoulders, too; she wasn't in there.

Someone came up from behind and hugged me. I turned round to look at Priyanka.

'I didn't know what I was saying at the water cooler,' I said.

'Shut up and hug me,' Priyanka said and opened her arms.

Our eyes met, and even though I wanted to say so much, our eyes did all the talking. I hugged her for a few seconds and then she kissed me. Our lips locked, and every passenger in the traffic jam looked on, enjoying the spectacle. After six months apart there was a lot of pent-up feeling. Vroom and everyone from the Qualis surrounded us and began to clap and whistle, then all the vehicles on the road joined in, applauding with their horns. But I couldn't see them or hear them. All I could see was Priyanka, and all I could hear was my inner voice saying, 'Kiss her, kiss her and kiss her more.'

Well, guys, that's how that night, and my story, ends. We couldn't know what, how or when things would happen, but that's what life's like: uncertain, screwed up at times, but still fun. However, let me tell you where we were one month after that night. Vroom and I started our website design company with the seed capital Bakshi had given us. We called it the Black Sheep Web Design Company. In a month, we had only managed to get one local order, but it helped us break even.

Esha gave up her modelling aspirations and continued to work at the call centre, but now she works for a non-governmental organisation during the day. Her job is to fundraise from the corporate sector and I heard she's doing well. I guess male executives can't resist a hot woman asking for money for a good cause. Apart from that, Vroom's asked her out for a coffee on a semi-date—whatever that means—next week and I think she said yes.

Military Uncle got a visa for the US and went over to make amends with his son. He hasn't come back, so things must be working out. Radhika is fighting her divorce case with her husband and has moved in with Esha. She is also planning to visit her own parents for a while. Anuj has apologised, but Radhika is in no mood to relent yet.

Priyanka still works at Connexions, but in six months' time she plans to go to college for an accelerated one-year B.Ed. We decided that marriage is at least two years away. We meet often, but our first focus is her career. Her mother faked three heart attacks when Priyanka said no to Ganesh, but Priyanka yawned every single time until her mum gave up and closed the Ganesh file.

So it looks like things are working out. As for me as a person, I still feel the same for the most part. However, there is a difference. I used to feel I was a good-for-nothing non-achiever. But that's not true. After all, I helped save a lot of jobs at the call centre, I taught my boss a lesson, started my own company, was chosen over a big-catch Indian groom from Seattle by a wonderful girl and now I've even written a whole book. This means that i) I can do whatever I really want, ii) God is always with me and iii) there is no such thing as a loser after all.

Epilogue

'Wow,' I said, 'some story that was.' She nodded, and took a sip of water from her bottle, holding it tight so it didn't spill in the moving train.

'Thank you,' I said, 'it made our night go by pretty quickly.'

I checked the time; it was close to 7.00 a.m. and our journey was almost over. Delhi was less than an hour away. The train was tearing through the night, and on the horizon I could see a streak of saffron light up the sky.

'So, did you like it?'

'Yes, it was fun. But it also made me think. I went through a similar phase to Shyam, at work and in my personal life. I wish I'd heard this story earlier—it might have made me do things differently, or at least would have made me feel less bad.'

'There you go. It's one of those rare stories that's fun but can help you as well. And that's why I am asking you to share it. Are you ready to turn it into a book?' she said, replacing the cap on the water bottle.

'I guess. It will take some time, though,' I said.

'Of course. And I will give you all the people's details. Feel free to contact them if you want. Through which character will you tell the story?'

'Shyam. Like I said, his story's a lot like mine. I can relate to him because I had similar problems—my own dark side.'

'That's interesting,' she said. 'It's true, we all have a dark side—something we don't like, something that makes us angry and something we want to change about ourselves. The difference is how we choose to face it.'

I nodded. The train rocked in a soothing, gentle motion and we were silent until I spoke after a few minutes.

'Listen, sorry to say this, but there's one issue I think readers may have with this story.'

'What?'

'The conversation with God.'

She smiled. 'Where's the issue with that?' she said.

'Well, it's just that some people may not buy it. One has to present

reality in a story. Readers always say, "Tell me what really happened." So in that context, how is God calling going to fit in?'

'Why? Don't you think that could happen?' she said, shifting in her seat. Her blanket moved, uncovering a book I hadn't noticed before.

'Well, I don't know. It obviously doesn't happen very often. I mean, things need to have a rational, scientific explanation.'

'Really? Does everything in life work that way?'

'I guess. Please try and understand,' I said. 'Calls from God don't happen often. How can I write about it?'

'OK, listen. I'm going to give you an alternative to God's phone call. A rational one, OK?' she said and put her bottle away.

'What alternative?' I said.

'Let's rewind a bit. So they drove into a pit and the Qualis was trapped, suspended by rods, right? Are you OK with that part?'

'Right. I can live with that,' I said.

'And then they felt the end was near. There was no hope in life, literally and figuratively. So let's just say that at that moment Military Uncle spoke up saying, "I noticed an unusual situation here, so I thought I'd just check on you guys."'

'That's exactly what God said,' I said.

'Correct. And from that point on, whatever God said, you can reword as if Military Uncle had said it—all the stuff about success, the inner call and all those other things.'

'Really? Is that what happened?' I said.

'No. I didn't say that. I just said you have the option to do that; so that everything appears more rational. Do you understand my point?'

'Yes,' I said.

'So, you choose whichever version you want in the main story. It will, after all, be your story.'

I nodded.

'But can I ask you one question?'

'Sure,' I said.

'Which of the two is a better story?'

I thought for a second.

'The one with God in it,' I said.

'Just like life. Rational or not, life is better with God in it.'

I reflected on her words for a few minutes. She became silent and I looked at her face. She looked even lovelier in the light of dawn.

'Well, it looks like we're nearly in Delhi,' she said and looked out. There were no more fields, only the houses in Delhi's border villages.

'Yeah, the trip is over,' I said. 'Thanks for everything, er, let me guess, Esha, right?' I stood up to shake her hand.

'Esha? Why did you think I was her?'

'Because you're so good-looking.'

'Thanks.' She laughed. 'But sorry, I'm not Esha.'

'So? Priyanka?' I said.

'No.'

'Don't tell me, Radhika?'

'No, I'm not Radhika, either,' she said.

'Well then, who are you?'

She just smiled.

That's when it struck me. She was a girl, she knew the full story, but she wasn't Esha, Priyanka or Radhika. Which meant that there was only one alternative left.

'So . . . that means . . . Oh my . . .' My whole body shook as I found it difficult to balance. Her face shone and our compartment was suddenly filled with bright sunlight. I looked at her and she smiled. Then I saw that the open book next to her was the English translation of a holy text. My eyes focused on a few lines on the page that lay open:

> Always think of Me, become My devotee, worship Me and offer your homage unto Me. Thus you will come to Me without fail. I promise you this because you are My very dear friend.

'What?' I said as I felt my head spin. But she just smiled, raised her hand and placed it on my head.

'I just don't know what to say,' I said in the blinding light.

A sense of tiredness engulfed me and I closed my eyes.

When I opened them, the train had stopped and I knelt on the floor with my head down. The train was at Delhi station. The cacophony of porters, tea sellers and passengers rang in my ears. I slowly looked up at her seat, but she was gone.

'Sir, are you getting off on your own or do you need help?' A porter tapped my shoulder.

Chetan Bhagat

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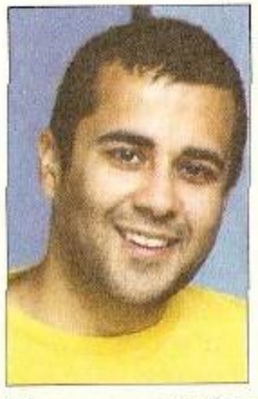

RD: What inspired you to write a novel in the midst of a successful, high-flying business career?
CB: While the investment banking life is exciting and challenging, it is very materially motivated. I felt there has to be more to life than my next bonus and so focused on something I love rather than what earns me the most. And that is how my first book was born. Like nature—out of love. I write fiction because I love entertaining people.
RD: Have you wanted to write for a long time?
CB: I have loved writing since my first four-line joke came out in the school magazine. I was so excited seeing my name in print, I would show the magazine to random people on buses!
RD: What inspired this particular book?
CB: It was the sudden transformation of the young Indian generation in the last ten years. Almost every middle-class person in India knows someone who works in a call centre at night. A nocturnal generation was too interesting a topic to miss.
RD: Are the characters based on particular people?
CB: Not really, though the main guy, Shyam, is based on me, in a phase of my life where I was stuck in my job and my boss was making my life miserable. It's all there in the book.
RD: I loved the character of the unpleasant Bakshi. Was he based on anyone?
CB: He was based on my stupid, evil boss in my previous job who killed my self-confidence for years. I thought maybe many other bosses are doing this to young people, so I wanted to warn my readers against these mean types.
RD: How did you set about researching the book?
CB: I visited several call centres and spent a lot of time with call-centre employees, including five of my first cousins and both my sisters-in-law. They used to tell interesting tales about their experiences. Finding out about this new industry and the people involved in it was one of the most rewarding things about writing *One Night at the Call Centre*.

RD: The book has a lot of humour. Do you find that difficult to write?
CB: It is my natural style of writing, so it was not hard. My literary talents are moderate, but the humour is my gift, I guess.
RD: What inspired you to bring God in as a character?
CB: I felt I had a message that was very important to give to the younger generation. Thus, it had to be given by an authority figure. And who better than God for some friendly advice? I have quite a spiritual bent as well, so some of it may have come from there.
RD: You say in one interview that you want your books to have a positive impact on Indian society. Could you explain a little more about that?
CB: Yes, this is a key goal. My first book is a funny look at education stress. I once heard from a kid who said that he had decided not to kill himself (because of poor grades) after reading my book, something he was planning to do otherwise. That kind of stuff shakes you up. I will always write to create some benefit for people. Hundreds have written to me that the *Call Centre* book restored their self-confidence. Having this is far more important than being internationally published or winning awards.
RD: Do you share Vroom's negative views on call centres?
CB: Yes. Call centres are good in the short term, but the long-term effects on India's skill base may not be so positive. Of course, I am not as emotional about the issue as Vroom is.
RD: How long did it take you to write *Call Centre* and what is your writing schedule?
CB: It took me a year to write the book. Because I have a day job, I write mostly on weekends.
RD: You currently live in Hong Kong. Do you go back to India often? And do you miss it?
CB: I am in India as we speak! Yes, I come here a lot—once a month. Right now I am here in Mumbai to see the shooting of the Bollywood film based on *One Night at the Call Centre*. I miss India a lot.
RD: I read that you love cooking. What is your favourite meal?
CB: I love anything consisting of good bread and lots of dips. Lebanese and Italian antipasti are great.
RD: Could you tell us a little more about your interest in yoga?
CB: While I was going through having a bad boss, I turned to yoga. It helped me a lot in terms of self-realisation and mental peace.
RD: Do you enjoy your new role as a best-selling author?
CB: Yes, God has chosen me out of nowhere and given me this gift. I don't, however, like the pressure to deliver that comes with it.