

If You Had Asked Then...

We were sitting under the bright hanging fluorescent lamp for our team lunch. The restaurant was filled with lively people cherishing every bite of food. The waiters move around back and forth, doing their job in hope of some tip.

I said “Don’t worry, I will solve that bug, Nishant”

I felt someone tapping my shoulder. I moved back swiftly keeping my elbow on the edge of the chair. “Avinash, right?” a soft, barely audible voice came from behind.

I was confused for a moment then “Harshita?”

“Yeah, long time!” she exclaimed, her voice bright with excitement. I stood up from my chair as she approached. She wore a soft pink kurti adorned with delicate white embroidery tracing the neckline and sleeves, paired with crisp white leggings. Her silver earrings swayed gently with every motion, catching the light as she tucked her hair behind her ear.

All my teammates were looking at me though I pretended that I did not feel their reaction. “On a team lunch?” she asked.

“Yup, the official lunch which isn’t official.” I spoke.

“I am also here for a team lunch, let’s meet after it?” she suggested.

“Yeah, all good!” I exclaimed.

“I will wait at the entrance, once I am done, ok?” she asked.

“Yeah, if I finish first, I will wait,” I added.

After finishing the team lunch, I went outside the restaurant and spotted her near the parking lot. “Your car?” I asked.

“No, I’m still struggling in this city to earn big.” She accepted.

“Same here, everyday an adventurous auto rickshaw ride on the uneven road is my destiny, right now!” I said smiling.

She too reciprocated with a gentle laugh, “Let’s take a walk, I know a café nearby, will grab some coffee.”

I nodded in agreement. We started to walk on the uneven pedestrian walkway with one or the other tiles opening its mouth wanting someone to tremble over it and fall on their face.

“Let me put on my mask, there is so much dirt coming from the roadside vehicles” she said taking out a surgical mask out of her purse.

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“Hey, are you added to the class group?” my classmate Yash, a tall muscular guy, asked me. The classroom was bustling with the chatter of students.

“No, not yet.” I answered.

“Write your phone number on this paper” he instructed.

I wrote my phone number and gave the paper back to him. He insisted, “Go, give this to that girl.”

I noticed a girl wearing a dark purple kurti, her face partially hidden behind a surgical mask — it was still the COVID era. There was a certain quietness about her as she stood alone, absorbed in her phone, the world seemingly muted around her.

I hesitated, clutching the folded piece of paper tightly. “You do it,” I muttered, pushing it toward my friend, unsure of my own courage.

Without a word, he took it and walked straight to her, unbothered by hesitation. She didn’t even look up at first, her eyes locked on her screen, until he gently held out the paper in front of her.

By the time I got back to the hostel, my body was screaming for rest. The day had drained me — endless lectures, the weight of unsaid words, and the anxiety of that one moment. As soon as I stepped into my room, I slung my bag onto the study chair and collapsed onto the bed, letting the silence settle over me.

My phone buzzed with a notification.

“Hi, can you forward this link to others?” a message from an unknown number.

“Ok...” I replied. I further asked, “What is your name?”

“Harshita” the reply came.

If it had been some other guy, he would have introduced himself too — but I wasn’t one of them.

“Yup, here is the cafe.” She pointed out.

We went inside. Harshita leading the way. “What would you like to have?” she asked me, looking at the menu board.

“Anything, I am always confused!” I replied.

“So, I will go with regular coffee, is it alright for you?” she asked.

“Yeah, absolutely.” I nodded in agreement.

I took possession of the tray and headed towards the table right beside the entrance.

“You know, I have been assigned to do front-end work now...” she said, taking her mask off.

“I don’t know much about it... they have given some front-end framework to learn” she continued.

“I can help you out, there are many courses over the internet” I suggested.

Her face lit up, “Oh, thanks...”

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A typical afternoon in a hostel room is spent sleeping—catching up on dreams that an engineering student is

deprived of at night, thanks to assignments, lab records, and an endless list of tasks.

My phone buzzed once again, a notification flashing a message,

“Hi, Harshita here.”

I replied, “Hi, Avinash this side.”

Maybe she was introducing her because we did not talk over text or in class for a month. Probably she thought I had forgotten her.

“Have you completed your sketchbook?” she asked.

I had completed it though I resisted sharing my sketches with her though, within a minute I thought to share it.

“Yes” a short reply from me.

“Can you share?” she asked.

“What solutions do you want?” I asked.

“All from planes and lines,” she replied.

I did share my sketches with her. The funny part is I had not seen her properly till now. I did see her when I was asked by Yash to hand over the paper though I did not pay attention that time.

The next day, I went to the college physics class was going on, Mr. Ramnath, a moderate height man, who always used to carry a pink attendance register on which rested the weight of the board duster and chalk, started reading the names aloud for the attendance.

I was curiously waiting for her name, when Mr. Ramnath took it, I saw a hand slowly going up in the air in the third row.

I tried to peek through the pile of students, and I noticed her eyes for the first time. Her eyes held some kind of depth which I could not fathom anyway with any kind of engineering instrument whichever is known to the human kind.

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“I am done,” she said after finishing her cup of coffee.

“Me too...” I reciprocated by keeping the cup on the table.
We left the cafe. “I will book an autorickshaw,” she said.
“Yeah, I will too,” I answered.

“Shall we pool an autorickshaw; it will cost less also...” she requested.

“No problem...” I agreed.

The autorickshaw arrived within five minutes. Harshita got in first, leading the way.

The autorickshaw started. We were seated at the back, Harshita took out her phone and started clicking photos.

“Don’t worry I am not using snapchat!” she said playfully.

“I don’t mind.” I defended myself.

“I remember very well!” she said.

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It was a bright and sunny Sunday—the kind meant for students to catch up on sleep. I was deep in slumber, much like the rabbit who lost the race to the tortoise, all because he decided to take a nap.

My phone buzzed with one more notification, “Hey can you come along with me to the bookstore?”

I replied “Yup, no problem.”

A month had passed, we both had been talking to each other in the class and over the text. We did become friends.

We met at the metro station. She was dressed in a light grey kurti adorned with colourful embroidery, paired with black jeans. A white cloth bag, featuring a cute little cat face woven onto it, hung casually over her shoulder.

“We need to go to Jayanagar.” She informed me.

I nodded and began trailing behind her. We were halfway down the stairs when the sound of the metro pulling into the platform echoed through the station. Without a word, we picked up our pace, hopping over steps in a half-run. Just as the doors began to close, I reached out, grabbed her hand, and we pushed through the crowd together—slipping into the metro just in time.

“What the hell!” she exclaimed, placing her hand on my shoulder, slightly breathless. I gently guided her hand to the hanging support bar.

“We could’ve just waited for the next train,” she said, half-scolding, half-laughing.

“But then we’d have missed this thrilling experience,” I replied, trying my best to sound cool.

We boarded an autorickshaw when we reached outside the Jayanagar metro station. Harshita got in; I followed up.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Taking a snap.” She answered.

“Snapchat?” I asked.

“Yup...” a single word reply came from her; she was busy in maintaining her useless streak.

“To be honest, I don’t feel like using this, taking random photos which make no sense, just to maintain a streak.” I spoke out my feelings.

“In these random photos, you can capture something which you won’t when you plan and capture a moment!” she exclaimed.

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The autorickshaw stopped at her apartment. “From Monday again the same cycle, go to the office, break your head on the laptop and come back... let’s meet tomorrow, It is Saturday.” She suggested.

“Ok... I will come by five o’clock.” I responded.

“No, come by eight o’clock. I will take you to a place, which you would have never seen before!” she got off the autorickshaw.

The autorickshaw made a clattering sound as she entered inside her apartment. It headed towards the destination which was the same place I had in my destiny for the past two years, yup, my apartment.

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“Hey, I am outside your hostel gate...” Harshita’s notification on my phone.

“Yup, just had my dinner, coming!” I replied.

We began walking toward the college’s main gate.

“So, where to?” I asked, my curiosity piqued.

“Let’s go to Blossom Park. We can take a walk there,” she suggested.

“But it’s probably closed by now, isn’t it?” I questioned.

“We’ll figure it out. Let’s go,” she said, her determination clear.

Finally, we reached Blossom Park. “Oops, I told you it would be closed,” I said.

Harshita, undeterred, scanned the perimeter of the park. "We're not going back. Look over there," she pointed, "There's a gap in the boundary wall."

I raised an eyebrow. "What if we get caught?"

She grinned. "You're thinking too much again. We're not doing anything wrong. Just follow me."

Before I could protest any further, she grabbed my hand and led me towards the wall. She motioned to a large cement rock nearby. "Help me with that. I need to climb."

Reluctantly, I placed the rock against the wall, and she nimbly climbed up, pulling herself over the low wall.

"Come on," she said, holding out her hand to him once she was on the other side.

I hesitated for a moment, but then, resigned, I grabbed her hand and climbed over as well.

We landed softly on the other side, looking around to make sure no one had seen us. The quiet, moonlit park stretched out in front of us.

"Let's go to the lotus pond" she suggested, her eyes sparkling with excitement. The moonlight shimmered on

the water's surface, and the gentle rustle of the trees filled the silence between us.

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The autorickshaw stopped at a well-known destination, the Blossom Park.

“Hey, you said, we would go to a place we have never visited before?” I asked.

“The best place I know!” she exclaimed.

We both settled down on a bench beside which stood a tall, pink blossom tree. From time to time the pink leaves kept falling from it, filling the space on the ground.

“Can I ask you something?” Harshita broke the silence between us.

“Yeah, sure. But let’s go sit on the grass, under the tree,” I suggested.

Once we settled down, she said, “Back in college, I used to think you liked me...”

She paused, then added, “A lot of people said that too. Was it true?”

“It was...” I began, but just then, two trucks sped by on the road, horns blaring, drowning out the rest of my words. Harshita's phone started vibrating. She looked at the screen, then stood up.

“I'll be back, it's too loud here,” she said, walking closer to the park's edge to take the call.

When she returned, she said, “Sorry, that was Vivek.”

Then, as if remembering something, she added, “Oh! I didn't tell you—Vivek and I are getting engaged in a couple of months.”

“I'm moving from Bangalore to Pune next month,” she said casually. “It just slipped my mind!”

She looked at me and smiled, “So, was it true?”

I smiled back, “Nope, just rumors.”