

"I can't believe you went back a whole week early."

"Well, what was I supposed to do, Aish? Let my parents lock me inside so they could go on their vacation?"

"Well, this might come as a bit of a surprise to you, but some parents trust their children with a key to the house. Especially when the child is not actually a child and is, in fact, a grown-ass woman."

"Wow."

"I know. Wild."

"Well, I'm at the canteen, I gotta go. Please come soon."

"Even with all the students around, the food is awful. I can't even imagine how bad it's going to be a week before semester starts."

"Ugh, don't make me think about what I'm about to eat."

"Don't die before I get there, Ananya."

"I'll try. Bye!"

"See you soon!"

Ananya hung up. She was *not* looking forward to canteen food. Going up to the counter, she bought tokens for a masala dosa. It wasn't the first time she was seeing most of the tables deserted. She didn't mind eating by herself, but the whole canteen being empty always weirded her out. After handing the token off to the cook, she looked back and around at the tables. There were a couple of the groundskeeping staff at one of the tables in the corner, in heated discussion over glass tumblers of coffee. Or tea, potentially. One of the cleaning ladies was chatting with the guy at the token counter.

Ananya's eyes eventually found a table, not to the sides, but not exactly in the middle either. A guy was sitting there. He looked like a student, and it looked like he was reading. She continued staring at him absentmindedly, comfortable knowing that he seemed engrossed and wasn't too likely to look up.

"Masaal dhosuh," came a call behind her. She turned around, and sure enough, there was a now a plate, with what was presumably the dosa she'd asked for on it.

"Thank you," she said to no one in particular, and started carrying her plate to one of the tables to the sides. She realised she was dragging her feet. She paused, made a snap decision, and started walking hesitantly towards Reading Guy's table. As she drew closer, she was able to make out wires coming out of his ears. She cursed inwardly. But she'd made the decision. She couldn't

turn to go in another direction again. What if all of the five people around that weren't paying the slightest attention to her saw it and judged her?

"Hi, do you mind if I sit here? The empty canteen just feels...weird."

Reading Guy looked up. He looked vaguely confused. He pulled the wires out of his ears.

"Sorry?"

"No, sorry, I just...do you mind if I sit here? The canteen's empty, and I..."

"Oh sure, take a seat. I wasn't expecting anyone to be around, this is a nice surprise."

"Thank you. Hi. I'm Ananya." She sat down.

"Hi. I'm Vikram. It's nice to meet you." He pressed some buttons on the device his earphones were plugged into. He raised one of the earbuds to his ears, just to make sure.

"Is that a Walkman?"

"Ah," Vikram grinned. "No. It's a Chinese knock-off, I think."

"Oh. Still. Pretty cool."

"Thanks."

Ananya started tearing up a piece of her dosa. *What were you listening to? What are you reading? How come you're here a week before the semester? What do you do here? What is this, an interrogation? Cool it, Ananya.* Vikram's food looked mostly untouched. It was some form of rice, with maybe two spoonfuls missing.

"Classes don't start 'til the 18th, right? How come you're here early?"

"Oh, my parents are going on vacation, and they don't get back until the 22nd," she replied, covering her mouthful of dosa with her hand.

"Right, so they kicked you out, huh?"

"It was more of a mutual kicking, really."

"Uh huh, I'm sure."

"Did you and your parents also come to a mutual kicking agreement?"

"Oh, no, I actually didn't go back home. I had some work over the break."

"Really? What do you do?"

"I uh...read crystal balls, interpret dreams, foretell people's deaths...you know, the usual."

Ananya narrowed her eyes. Vikram's face was straight. "Are you serious?"

"Of course. The best part of my day is when I get to describe exactly how someone is going to die. Hands down."

"Listen, if you're kidding, you *have* to tell me. Because I will believe you."

"Will you now? This should be fun."

"Are you not eating?" Ananya asked, forcing herself to tear off yet another piece from her plate.

"How's your dosa?"

"Well, for starters, calling it a dosa would be a crime."

"That's what I thought."

"But hey, a girl's gotta eat."

"Hmm. You know what? You wanna grab some actual food?"

"Sure. How?"

"Leave your, um, baked batter circle thing."

"Baked batter circle thing. Wow, you should be namer of all the things."

"Well, you're the one who ordered it. Come on," Vikram stood up.

Ananya looked up and down between Vikram and her plate, a little thrown. Vikram was stuffing his book and his music player into a satchel he retrieved from the chair beside him. "Uh, come on, where?"

"Just trust me."

Ananya made her second snap decision of the day. She left her plate and got out of her chair.

"Where are we going?"

"Have you been to Café #66 on the highway?"

"No, but I've seen it."

"There's this little...I guess you could call it a hut, on the other side of the road, and the food there will blow your mind."

"Oh? How come I've never seen this place?" She washed her hands at the trough outside the canteen.

Vikram waited. "That's because it's not like an official restaurant or anything. It's actually a house. The family that lives there, well, they like feeding people. That's the best I can describe it."

“Okay, how are we going to get to Café #66?” They started walking again.

“I was thinking we walk? If that’s okay with you?”

“All the way to Café #66?”

“Mhm.”

Ananya bit her lip. Vikram was looking at her expectantly. *Eh, what else am I doing?* “Alright, let’s do it.”

“Perfect!”

“What’s so special about this place, anyway?”

“Oh, they just make for you whatever they’re eating themselves. They usually have meals in the afternoon, and they make something different each day. It’s literally like you’re eating at home.”

“That does sound nice.”

“It’s the best thing. Not a lot of people know about this place, and I would like to keep it that way.”

“I won’t say a word.”

They reached the campus entrance. As they were heading out, one of the security guards called out. “Madam, 7 'o'clock before return.”

“Okay anna,” Ananya called back. They kept walking.

“Curfew is such bullshit.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about it, it doesn’t apply to boys.”

“Yeah, but doesn’t it frustrate you?”

“Sure. But I get it. It’s just management mitigating liabilities, and covering their asses. Think about it this way. You’re a parent, and you want to send your daughter off to college. Which argument are you going to listen to? Bunch of college girls screaming about unfair double standards? Or, ‘We enforce the highest standards of safety and security in our campus’? My being frustrated about it isn’t going to change anything, it’s just my reality. The change has to be much more systemic, and has to happen in society as a whole.”

“Mitigating liabilities? Systemic change? Do you study law here?”

“Haha, no. I tend to get a little wordy sometimes. But do you agree with what I said?”

Vikram’s eyes narrowed in thought. “You’re right. I should be able to tell you otherwise, but I can’t. It *is* your reality, and it’s unfair.”

Ananya just shrugged. They walked in silence for a while. Ananya had never really walked too much outside the campus. She'd gone out with friends to places nearby, but they usually took a bus, or an auto. Two years in, she was having a new experience at college. *Not bad*, she thought to herself.

"What were you reading?"

"Oh, I was going through the notes my professor had left me," Vikram seemed like he was pulling himself out of a reverie.

"Notes on..."

"A collection of my short stories."

"Your short stories? You write?"

"Well, I try to."

"What do you write?"

"Uh...I usually find that a difficult question to answer."

"Well, what is this collection about?"

"Honestly? This one's random. There's no underlying theme or metaphor. That was actually my professor's first note."

"I think you should ignore that note. An anthology doesn't have to be under a unified theme."

"Thank you for saying that! I completely agree. But some of these literature people, I tell you."

"I know the kind," Ananya grinned. "Tell me about your stories."

"Okay, well, one of them is loosely based on a real dream I once had, and it's about the idea of utopia, and whether the human psyche would reject something that is one hundred percent perfect. Or whether humans, as they are, are capable of attaining existential perfection in the first place."

"That sounds, wow, that sounds heavy."

"It's a little silly if you actually read it."

"Well, can I read it?"

"I...", he bit his tongue sheepishly.

"No pressure. You don't have to if you don't want to."

"It's just...it needs some more work."

"I get that. But if you're ever showing people, I would love to read it."

"I will remember that. Do you read a lot?"

"Not as much as I'd like to. I read a fair bit."

"What's the last thing you read?"

"Oh, currently, I'm reading *A Tale of Two Cities* again."

"Again? You like it, huh?"

"I love the prose. But also, the French Revolution is one of my favourite settings of all time."

"Why is that?"

"It's all just so dramatic, and theatrical. There's intrigue, there's betrayal, there's treason, there's overthrowing, there's espionage, I mean, what's not to love? Also, historically, I find it really ironic how quickly people went back to the same system they worked so hard to destroy. For me, it's such a fascinating study of the human character. As a collective."

"Phew, and you call *me* heavy. I suppose it's safe to assume you've read *Les Misérables*?"

"Hey! You pronounced it right! I have. In fact, one of my longest standing bucket list items is to learn French so I can read the original."

"That's a really good aspiration."

"Thank you, but I haven't made any actual effort towards it whatsoever." She could see the board for Café #66 in the distance.

"Go easy on yourself, it's hard to prioritise bucket list things. Life always gets in the way. I'm sure you're going to do it one day."

"We'll see."

There was another bout of silence as the café's sign drew nearer.

"Man, I'm starving."

"Yeah, all this walking has given me an appetite. The food better be as good as you say it is."

"Oh, it will be. Just wait and see."

They drew up next to Café #66, and stopped to cross the road. It looked like it might rain. As they waited for the stream of vehicles to thin, Vikram pointed to a quaint little house on the other side. Roofed like a hut, it was a one-storey affair that looked like it had been standing there for a while.

Ever since the college had opened its doors, the spots that cropped up along the highway were tailored specifically to attract a younger crowd. Nothing created a Frankenstein's monster of urbanisation like a university in a remote location. But this house seemed an oasis, a bastion of resistance, unaffected by the bland sameness that seemed to make up the soul of every other structure in sight.

Despite being the odd one out, the house managed to make everything else look out of place.

As Ananya was considering all this, Vikram had had enough and stepped out onto the road, throwing his hand up, signalling for oncoming traffic to let them pass. It seemed to be working. Ananya had no choice but to follow. "This is pretty dangerous," she observed.

"Yeah, well, it's either starvation or getting hit by a truck - I'm dying either way. At least now I get to choose."

"It's hard to argue with that."

They reached the other side, without having been introduced to the business end of a motor vehicle. They tracked back a little from the zebra crossing, and approached the house. A woman was sitting on the stone counter outside the house. She smiled when she saw Vikram.

"Vaa thambi."

"Vanakkam akka, saaptaacha?"

"Haanh. Come in, meals ready. Selvam!" she called out, as she headed inside.

"You come here pretty often, huh?"

"Yeah, I've been here a few times."

They left their shoes at the door and headed inside. There were already two plates laid out on the floor, and two tumblers of water next to them. Ananya sat down next to Vikram, as he conversed with the woman. A man appeared from the recesses of the house, carrying a large vessel. Before Ananya had a chance to pay attention to what Vikram and the woman were talking about, her plate had been filled out with a full course meal.

Vikram dug in. She followed suit. The woman stood around, asking after every dish, and egging them on to eat more. Ananya was a little intimidated by the unfamiliar environment and also didn't have anything to contribute to the conversation, so she ate in silence. It could have just been the hunger, but everything seemed delicious to her. She wolfed down more than she would have believed possible.

Appetite sated, they both stood up, and washed their hands from a pot of water placed outside. Drying his hand, Vikram fished out his wallet from his satchel. The woman shook her head, refused to take money, and made him put his wallet back. Barely able to walk, the two of them were once again on the side of the highway, headed back in the direction of the college.

"You don't pay?"

"It's actually a pay whatever you feel like type of deal. But sometimes, they flat out refuse to take any money. So every now and then I fold up a five hundred and hide it in a ten and slip it to them."

"Smart. They seem really sweet. Why do they do this?"

"They really just like feeding people. I think they have a son who went off to join the army, or went to a different country, or something. I don't know the details. But they really have a soft spot for people our age."

"Our age? How old do you think I am?"

"How old are you?"

"I'm not answering that."

"Come on, why not?"

"Only people I know and like can ask me that question."

"And you don't like me?"

"I haven't decided yet."

"Okay, but when people you like ask you this question, do you tell them the truth?"

"Irrelevant."

"Hah, thought so. Anyway, what'd I tell you about the food?"

"Fine, you were right. It was really good. It was as good as our cook's."

"Oh, you have a cook? How fancy."

"My *parents* have a cook. My mother can't cook to save her life. And my father married her before he learned this."

"Wow, the con of the century. People have gotten divorced for a lot less."

Ananya said nothing.

"Shit, I didn't mean to...I'm sorry if that was insensitive. I shouldn't make comments without..."

Ananya smiled.

"Are you...were you messing with me? Oh, that was mean. That was really, really mean."

"Then why are you smiling?"



"That is just not okay."

"You're a big boy, you'll be fine."

Vikram shook his head, still smiling. Ananya looked smug. A bus passed them on the road, blaring music so loud they felt it in their chests. They heard the thumping for quite a while after the bus had turned the bend ahead and disappeared from view.

"Hey. If you don't mind me asking, what's the deal with you coming back early? Couldn't you have just stayed home even if your parents were on vacation? Don't get me wrong, I'm glad you didn't. I'm just curious."

Ananya took a moment before she spoke. "Well, it's not the full story. My parents *really* don't want me going to college here."

"Where do they want you to go?"

"Not here. And even so, college isn't the highest on their list of priorities."

"Wow, that sucks."

"No, it's not what you think. They're not looking to marry me off, not exactly. It's complicated. They don't want me so far from home in the first place."

"Why not?"

"I'm going to leave it at it's complicated. Anyway, they're always looking for the slightest of excuses to take me out of here. I can't leave. I've worked too hard, and I actually care about getting my degree. They're actually on vacation right now. They were going to have a discussion with me about returning when they got back. I didn't want to deal with that. So I left and came back early. I don't know why I'm telling you all this. Even my friends don't know the whole story."

"I understand. Sometimes, these things just happen."

"What about you? Why didn't you go back home at all? You couldn't take so much as a week off?"

"I'm not exactly a regular student here. I've lost track of how long I've been here. It's not that I've failed classes, I haven't. I'm sort of a teacher's assistant in my department. That's not an official role. I just...I'd also like to leave it at it's complicated."

"That's fair. But that's not exactly what I asked you."

"Well, every time I go home, it gets harder and harder to come back. But also, the time I have left here is rapidly shortening. I don't have a lot of time to uncomplicate things here, because things are complicated on more than one front. So with time running out, the quicker I figure things out here, the better. If I don't, all the time I've spent here might go to waste. It will have

been for nothing, which will further complicate things on the home front. I'm just rambling at this point, sorry."

"No, that's alright. You look like you could use a good vent."

He sighed. "Life, am I right?"

"Life," Ananya agreed.

The sky darkened a little more, and they picked up their pace. They were at the campus entrance when they felt the first drops of drizzle on their faces. The guards checked their IDs and let them through. They stopped at the fountain near the entrance.

"The stuff in my bag can't get wet, I have to head back."

"Me too, I've got some unpacking to do."

"Right. It was really lovely meeting you, Ananya."

"It was great meeting you too, Vikram."

Vikram started in the direction of the boys hostel. "You're going to tell me how old you are one day."

Ananya raised an eyebrow.

"What? Come on! You still haven't decided?"

Ananya shrugged.

Vikram shook his head, smiled, and turned around.

As she watched him walk away, Ananya made her third snap decision of the day. She smiled.

Maybe coming back a week early hadn't been such a bad idea after all.