

THE DIWALI

“Will you join the bunk or not?” the class representative hollered at Mukesh.

This reminded Mukesh of a similar question his father had put to him many years ago. He remembered the date clearly, it was 6th November 1996. The finals of the Titan cup between Australia and India, what a match it was... He planned an elaborate hoax; somebody had told him that if he slept holding an onion in the armpit, he would have fever and therefore could miss school for the day. Till date he does not know if somebody betrayed his secret or he never fell ill, because his father got wind of the scheme. After a good hiding, his father asked: “Will you ever bunk classes?”

That was a long time ago. Mukesh was now in college and first year in college is always challenging, especially if you are a hosteller. The shelter of school is gone; the comforts of home are gone. The challenge then is to survive independently and socially, both at the same

time. Mukesh was one of the freshmen who had yet to acknowledge this reality.

He came from a small town with limited resources and limited distractions. His parents had provided him with most middle class comforts and all middle class values. From an early age, it was ingrained in him that discipline and hard work were the most important tools to build a successful life. The interpretation of successful life for him meant a small self-owned home, a salaried job and respect. Like most of his contemporaries, he too believed that entry into a medical college was the most secure key to a successful life.

He had depended on discipline to get thus far and he saw no reason why he had to abandon this virtue, once it had got him this far.

Breaking rules was a very, very unpleasant proposition for him because of another reason also. It filled him with apprehension. One bad thought followed another and each intertwined so strongly, that the result would be a fabric of impending doom. His heart would then begin to thump so hard, that he often feared it would come out of his chest. His mouth ran dry and the rest of his body would be covered in a thin sheet of sweat. It was a horrible sensation.

This combination of faith and fear had formed a formidable restraint. He had rules for everything. From those determining the timing of his hair-cut to the timing of leaving the badminton court, every tick of the clock had the same significance as the midnight stroke had for Cinderella. From the number of times he revised his syllabus to the number of steps from hostel to college, everything had to be exact.

He found his classmates' utter disregard for rules and authority very appalling. How they could ever hope to succeed in life if they lead it so wantonly, he often wondered. The feelings of dislike were mutual. They found his utter disregard for freedom appalling.

The simmering tensions between Mukesh and his classmates had continued to brew, but till date had never boiled over. The festival season however would change this state of unpleasant stalemate forever. This year Diwali holidays would begin on Tuesday. A proposal was doing the rounds that if a bunk was agreed upon for Monday; the holidays would effectively begin from Saturday. The three days of extra holidays were welcome to everyone, except Mukesh. The idea of bunking was intolerable to him.

"No... I am here to study, not frolic around. If the authorities think two days of holidays are enough, they must have a good reason for it."

"We are not doing something that has never been done before. You can ask the seniors, they even bunked tutorials to extend their holidays before Christmas."

His heart was already pounding and the vision of bunking a tutorial began to trigger the chain of panic. "But... but I can't do it."

"We must maintain unity. All cannot suffer because of one. You must abstain from classes on Monday or we will boycott you for the rest of the course... No, for the rest of our lives...!"

Mukesh could hardly speak now. He was angry, very angry, and equally afraid.

He went back to his room, he could not bear to stay and face the onslaught of snide remarks that his classmates were making. In the sanctity of his room, he tried to think. This did not help him much; it only seemed to increase his unease.

He turned for counsel to his trusted friend, philosopher and guide. No, it was not one of his teachers. They

were too distant and detached from reality; it was one of his seniors. He had met him on the porch of the college on the day he joined the institution.

"*Bhaia*, can you tell me where the academic section is?" Mukesh enquired from the gentleman standing there. He had a white coat over his shoulders, wore thick glasses and pleat-less beige trousers. It looked as if there was a deliberate attempt to look older. Mukesh came to know later that he had just faced a viva-voce examination.

"New batch?"

"Yes *bhaia*."

"Rule number 1: no *bhai-bahen* in the college. You will call everyone *respected boss* or *respected miss boss*. And where is your uniform, mosquito? You will have to wear a uniform; white full- sleeved shirt with second button red, white trousers with at least 18" bottoms, black canvas shoes with red laces, no belts, hair short enough to avoid grip, no beard or moustache."

Ever since, the advice had always been excellent and Mukesh had all the faith that he was the only one who could help him.

"So you are scared of breaking the rules and you don't want to risk a boycott also?"

"No boss! I dislike breaking rules."

"Oh... ok, ok. But you can neither break the rules nor break the unity. I think the best thing for you to do is to request the Principal for leave for one day."

Mukesh could not sleep that night. His mind was working like a disco chaser-light. It ruled out one option after another and then restarted from the first option. Finally, he decided that boss is always right.

Next morning he found himself outside the Principal's office. He sent a slip stating his name, semester and reason of visit through the peon and waited. Numbness had set in and he did not know how long he had waited before he was let in.

The imposing room decorated with trophies and mementos, the huge table and the sight of the grand man who presided over it shook him back to reality. He suddenly realized what he had put himself into.

"What do you want?" the Principal boomed.

His voice failed him. He could hear the Rajdhani Express galloping in his chest, he only hoped he wouldn't pass out. With some considerable effort he pulled out the application he had written. It read thus:

To

The Principle & Controller,
SP Medical College & Associated Group of Hospitals,
Bikaner.

Sub: Request for leave of absence of one day.

Respected Sir,

With due respect and humble submission, I, Mukesh Kumar, student of second semester beg to pray that due to urgent domestic work, I would not be able to attend my classes on Monday. For the same kindly allow me leave of absence and oblige.

Thanking you,
Your's faithfully,
Mukesh Kumar.

"Hmmm... You have committed at least three mistakes here. Mistake number 1: I am not an outdated dogma: as you have referred to me in the application, but the key, the first in command of this institution.

Mistake number 2: the additional apostrophe that you have added to your salutation belies your knowledge of the language.

Mistake number 3: that you ask for leave just before the vacation belies your knowledge of the rules.

You youngsters seem to take everything for granted. You have absolutely no regard for authority or correctness or rules. Do you realize that anything and everything you learn here may stand in between life and death for someone? It will not be like your theory papers, where you will have the choice to leave out one of four questions!"

"But sir.... My home is far, I will not be able to reach home in time for Diwali. This is my first Diwali away from home..."

Something seemed to strike a chord with the key, the first in command of the institution. May be he remembered his first Diwali away from his family or his children who wouldn't be able to come home this festival.

"Do you have enough attendance? I will not allow anyone with less than 75% attendance to write the university exams this time."

"I have not missed a single class since I joined, Sir."

"Okay! I grant you leave. Otherwise you might lead a bunk and go anyway. And how will you go? By bus? Fill in the concession form, I will sign it too."

He tucked in the concession form and the approved application safely in his pocket and rushed to the class. Finally, the ordeal was over. He would go to the class representative and tell him he too would stay away from college on Monday. The thought of spending five days at home actually seemed to please him.

Saturday morning, the inmates were fleeing the hostel in a fashion reminiscent of the commotion of a plague stricken city. Everyone wanted to get away from it as soon as possible.

Mukesh was patiently waiting in the queue for the bus ticket and was utterly disgusted at the way, others were jumping the line. Finally, when he reached the counter, he presented his concession form and asked for the price of the student ticket. The person across the counter looked at the form very carefully and asked him to wait. After an eternity, to the relief of the line behind him, the man appeared and asked Mukesh to go to the general manager's office. The general manager had his concession form on his table and was pacing up and down the room pensively when Mukesh entered.

"Is this your concession form, child?"

"Yes Sir."

"Why did you do this?"

"Because I am a student and am entitled to the concession for travelling back home."

"Indeed!! And are you also entitled to forge signatures?"

"Forge signatures?" Mukesh's mouth was completely dry. He was clueless.

"Yes. These signatures on the column of head of the institution, do you recognise them?"

"Yes sir. These are the Principal's signature."

"And why are they different from the signatures on all other forms?"

"I do not know. But mine are real."

"Listen son, we have all been through such times. You have not even begun your career; I do not want to taint you. Go away before I lose my patience and do not try these cheap tricks again."

Mukesh did not know what was going on. How could all his friends get concession forms? They had not even applied for leave.

"What happened?" the class representative enquired.

"Nothing.... They think I am a fraud... I will show them."

"Calm down and tell me what exactly happened."

Mukesh related the entire incident in bursts of stop and starts. The class representative also burst... into laughter.

"This is what happens when you don't walk the middle path. There is a Principal's seal in the hostel and I signed as Principal on all the forms, so all forms look identical except yours. And before you fume and start that rhetoric of right and wrong, I offer you the middle path. Each form allows a maximum of six students in a travelling party, mine has only five names...." the class representative said with a mischievous grin.

"But I cannot possibly... What will they think? What will they do if they find out?"

"Listen friend... this is a season of festivities, a season of being merry. This Diwali, clear the cobwebs of your mind instead of clearing those of your store room. Let go..."

With these words he wrote Mukesh's name on the concession form and jumped the queue. In a few minutes he was there with the tickets in his hand and they travelled together...