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Bare Beginnings

BEFORE I REALLY BEGIN THIS BOOK, LET ME FIRST TELL you what this book is not. It is not a guide on how to live through college. On the contrary, it is probably an example of how screwed up your college years can get if you don't think straight. But then this is my take on it, you're free to agree or disagree. I expect Ryan and Alok, psychos both of them, will probably kill me after this but I don't really care. I mean, if they wanted their version out there, they could have written one themselves. But Alok cannot write for nuts, and Ryan, even though he could really do whatever he wants, is too lazy to put his bum to the chair and type. So stuff it boys — it is my story, I am the one writing it and I get to tell it the way I want it.

Also, let me tell you one more thing this book is certainly not. This book will not help you get into IIT. I think half the trees in the world are felled to make up the IIT entrance exam

guides. Most of them are crap, but they might help you more than this one will.

Ryan, Alok and I are probably the last people on earth you want to ask about getting into IIT. All we would say as advice is, if you can lock yourself in a room with books for two years and throw away the key, you can probably make it here. And if your high school days were half as miserable as mine, disappearing behind a pile of books will not seem like such a bad idea. My last two years in school were living hell, and unless you captained the basketball team or played the electric guitar since age six, probably yours were too. But I don't really want to get into all that.

I think I have made my disclaimers, and it is time for me to commence.

Well, I have to start somewhere, and what better than the day I joined the Indian Institute of Technology and met Ryan and Alok for the first time; we had adjacent rooms on the second floor of the Kumaon hostel. As per tradition, seniors rounded us up on the balcony for ragging at midnight. I was still rubbing my eyes as the three of us stood to attention and three seniors faced us. A senior named Anurag leaned against a wall. Another senior, to my nervous eye, looked like a demon from cheap mythological TV shows – six feet tall, over a hundred kilos, dark, hairy, and huge teeth that were ten years late meeting an orthodontist. Although he inspired terror, he spoke little and was busy providing background for the boss, Baku, a lungi-clad human toothpick, and just as smelly is my guess.

"You bloody freshers, dozing away eh? Rascals, who will give an introduction?" he screamed.

"I am Hari Kumar sir, Mechanical Engineering student, All India Rank 326." I was nothing if not honest under pressure.

"I am Alok Gupta sir, Mechanical Engineering, Rank 453," Alok said as I looked at him for the first time. He was my height, five feet five inches – in short, very short – and had these thick, chunky glasses on. His portly frame was covered in neatly ironed white kurta-pajamas.

"Ryan Oberoi, Mechanical Engineering, Rank 91, sir," Ryan said in a deep husky voice and all eyes swung to him.

Ryan Oberoi, I repeated his name again mentally. Now here was a guy you don't see in IIT too often; tall, with spare height, purposefully lean and unfairly handsome. A loose gray T-shirt proclaimed 'GAP' in big blue letters on his chest and shiny black shorts reached his knees. Relatives abroad for sure, I thought. Nobody wears GAP to bed otherwise.

"You bastards," Baku was shrieking, "Off with your clothes."

"Aw Baku, let us talk to them a bit first," protested Anurag, leaning against the wall, sucking a cigarette butt.

"No talking!" Baku said, one scrawny hand up. "No talking, just remove those damn clothes."

Another demon grinned at us, slapping his bare stomach every few seconds. There seemed to be no choice so we surrendered every item of our clothing, shivering at the unholy glee in Baku's face as he walked by each of us, checking us out and grinning.

Nakedness made the difference between our bodies more stark as Alok and me drew figures on the floor with deeply

embarrassed toes, trying to be casual about our twisted balloon figures. Ryan's body was flawless, man, he was a hunk; muscles that cut at the right places and a body frame that for once resembled the human body shown in biology books. You could describe his body as sculpture. Alok and I, on the other hand, weren't exactly what you'd call art.

Baku told Alok and me to step forward, so the seniors could have better view and a bigger laugh.

"Look at them, mothers fed them until they are ready to explode, little Farex babies," Baku cackled.

The demon joined him in laughter. Anurag smiled behind a burst of smoke as he extinguished another cigarette, creating his own special effects.

"Sir, please sir, let us go sir," Alok pleaded to Baku as he came closer.

"What? Let you go? We haven't even done anything yet to you beauties. C'mon bend down on all fours now, you two fatsos."

I looked at Alok's face. His eyes were invisible behind those thick, bulletproof spectacles, but going by his contorted face, I could tell he was as close to tears as I was.

"C'mon, do what he says," the demon admonished. He and Baku seemed to share a symbiotic relationship; Baku needed him for brute strength, while the servile demon needed him for directions.

Alok and I bent down on all fours. More laughter, this time from above our heads, ensued. The demon suggested racing both of us, his first original opinion in a while but Baku overrode him.

"No racing-vacing, I have a better idea. Just wait, I have to go to my room. And you naked cows, don't look up."

Baku raced up the corridor as we waited for twenty tense seconds, gazing at the floor. I glanced sideways and noticed a small water puddle adjacent to Alok's head, droplets falling from his eye.

Meanwhile, the demon made Ryan flex his muscles and make warrior poses. I am sure he looked photogenic, but didn't dare look up to verify.

Our ears picked up Baku's hurried steps as he returned.

"Look what I got," he said, holding up his hands.

"Baku, what the hell is that for...?" Anurag enquired as we turned our heads up.

In each of his hands, Baku held an empty Coke bottle. "Take a wild guess," he said as he clanged the bottles together, making suggestive gestures.

Face turning harder, arms still in modelling pose, Ryan spoke abruptly, "Sir, what exactly are you trying to do?"

"What, isn't it obvious? And who the hell are you to ask me?" choked Baku.

"Sir, stop," Ryan said, in a louder voice.

"Fuck off," Baku dismissed, disbelief writ large in his widened eyes at this blatant rebellion against his age-old authority.

As Baku put the bottles in position, Ryan abandoned his pin-up pose and jumped. Catching him unawares, he grabbed the two bottles and stamped hard on Baku's feet. Baku released his hands and the bottles were with Ryan, James Bond style.

We knew that stomp hurt since Baku's scream was ultrasonic.

"Get this bastard," Baku shrieked in agony.

The demon's IQ was clouded by the events but his ears registered the command for action and he had just collected himself in response when Ryan smashed the two Coke bottles on the balcony parapet. Each bottle now was butt-broken, and he waved the jagged ends in air.

"Come, you bastards," Ryan swore, his face scarlet like a watermelon slice. Baku and the demon retreated a few paces. Anurag, who had been smouldering in the backdrop, snapped to attention. "Hey, cool it everyone here. How did this happen? What is your name - Ryan, take it easy man. This is just fun."

"It's not fun for me," growled Ryan, "Just get the hell out of here."

Alok and I looked at each other. I was hoping Ryan knew what he was doing. I mean sure, he was saving our ass from a Coke bottle, but broken Coke bottles could be a lot worse.

"Listen yaar," Anurag started as Ryan cut him short.

"Just get lost," Ryan shouted so hard that Baku seemed to blow away just from the impact. Actually, he was shuffling backward slowly and steadily till he was almost flying in his haste to get away, the demon following suit. Anurag stood there gaping at Ryan for a while and then looked at us.

"Tell him to control himself. Or one day he will take you guys down too," Anurag said.

Alok and I got up and wore our clothes.

"Thanks Ryan, I was really scared," Alok said, as he removed his spectacles to wipe snot and tears, face to face with his hero at last.

There is a reason why they say men should not cry, they just look so, like, ugly. Alok's spectacles were sad enough, but

his baby-wet blubbery eyes were enough to depress you into suicide.

"Yes, thanks Ryan, some risk you took there. That Baku guy is sick. Though you think they would have done anything?" I said, striving for a cool I did not feel.

"Who knows? Maybe not," Ryan rotated a shoulder, "But you can never tell when guys get into mob mentality. Trust me, I have lived in enough boarding schools."

Ryan's heroics were enough to make us all bond faster than Fevicol. Besides, we were hostelite neighbours and in the same engineering department. They say you should not get into a relationship with people you sleep with on the first date. Well, though we hadn't slept together, we had seen each other naked at primary meet, so perhaps we should have refrained from striking up a friendship. But our troika was kind of inevitable.

"M-A-C-H-I-N-E," the blackboard proclaimed in big bold letters.

As we entered the amphitheatre-shaped lecture room, we grabbed a pile of handouts each. The instructor sat next to the blackboard like a bloated beetle, watching us settle down, waiting for the huddled murmurs to cease.

He appeared around forty years of age, with gray hair incandescent from three tablespoons of coconut oil, wore an un-tucked light blue shirt and had positioned three pens in his front pocket, along with chalks, like an array of bullets.

"Welcome everyone. I am Professor Dubey, Mechanical Engineering department...so, first day in college. Do you feel special?" he said in a monotone.

The class remained silent: We were busy scanning our handouts and feeling like a herd.

The course was Manufacturing Processes, often shortened to ManPro for easier pronunciation. The handouts consisted of the course outline. Contents covered the basic techniques of manufacturing – such as welding, machining, casting, bending and shaping. Along with the outline, the handout contained the grading pattern of the course.

Majors – 40%

Minors – 20%

Practicals – 20%

Assignments (6-8) and Surprise Quizzes (3-4) – 20%

Prof Dubey noticed the limp response to his greeting and made his voice more exuberant. "Look at the handout later. Don't worry, you will get enough of these, one for every course. Put them aside now," he said as he stood up and walked toward the blackboard.

He took out a chalk from his pocket with a flourish. Celluloid-terrorists reserved for hand-grenades and underline the word 'machine' approximately six times. Then he turned to us. "Machine, the basic reason for existence of a mechanical engineer. Everything you learn finds application in machines. Now, can anyone tell me what a machine is?"

The class fell even more silent. That's the first lesson with various degrees of silence.

"Anyone?" the professor asked again as he started walking through the rows of students. As the students on the aisles felt even more stalked and avoided eye contact, I turned around to study my new classmates. There must have been seventy

of us in this class, three hundred of us in a batch. I noticed a boy in front of me staring at the instructor intently, his head moving to and fro, mouth ajar; a timid sort, whom Baku could polish off for snack any given day.

"You," Prof Dubey chose me as his first casualty.

It was the first time *the* condition struck me, where tongue cleaves unto dental roof, body freezes, blood vessels rupture and sweat bursts out in buckets.

"You, I am talking to you," the professor clarified.

"Hari, Hari.." somebody inside me called but could only get my answering machine. I could have attempted an answer, or at least a silly 'I don't know' but it was as if my mouth was AWOL.

"Strange," surmised Prof Dubey dubiously as he moved to another student.

"You in the check shirt. What do you think?"

Check Shirt had hitherto been pretending to take notes to escape the professor's glance. "Sir, Machine sir...is a device...like big parts...sir like big gears and all..."

"What?" Prof Dubey's disgust fell like spit on Check Shirt. "See, the standard just keeps falling every year. Our admission criteria are just not strict enough." He shook his oiled skull, the one that contained all the information in this planet, including the definition of machines.

"Yeah, right. Busted my butt for two years for this damn place. One in hundred is not good enough for them," Ryan whispered to me.

"Shshh," ordered Prof Dubey, looking at the three of us, "anyway, the definition of a machine is simple. It is anything that reduces human effort. Anything. So, see the world around you and it is full of machines."

Anything that reduces human effort, I repeated in my head. Well, that sounded simple enough.

"So, from huge steel mills, to simple brooms, man has invented so much to reduce human effort," the professor continued, as he noticed the class was mesmerized by his simple clarification.

"Airplane?" said one student in the front row.

"Machine," instructor said.

"Stapler," suggested another.

"Machine."

It really was amazing. A spoon, car, blender, knife, chair – students threw examples at the professor and there was only one answer – machine.

"Fall in love with the world around you," Prof Dubey smiled for the first time, "for you will become the masters-of machines."

A feeling of collective joy darted through the class for having managed to convert Prof Dubey's sour expression into smiles.

"Sir, what about a gym machine, like a bench press or something?" Ryan interrupted the bonhomie.

"What about it?" Prof Dubey stopped beaming.

"That doesn't reduce human effort. In fact, it increases it."

The class fell silent again.

"Well, I mean..." Prof Dubey said as he scouted for arguments.

Boy, did Ryan really have a point?

"Perhaps it is too simple a definition then?" Ryan said in a pseudo-helpful voice.

"What are you trying to do?" the professor asked tight-lipped as he came close to us again, "Are you saying that I am wrong?"

"No sir, I'm just..."

"Watch it son. In my class, just watch it," was all Prof Dubey said as he moved to the front.

"Okay, enough fun. Now, let us focus on ManPro," he said as he rubbed off the word 'machine' from the blackboard and the six underlines below it, "my course is very important. I am sure many professors will tell you about their courses. But I care about ManPro. So, don't miss class, finish your assignments and be prepared, a surprise quiz can drop from the sky at any time."

He went on to tackle casting, one of the oldest methods of working with metal. After an hour on how iron melts and foundry workers pour it into sand moulds, he ended the session.

"That is it for today. Best of luck once again for your stay here. Remember, as your head of department Prof Cherian says, the tough workload is by design, to keep you on your toes. And respect the grading system. You get bad grades, and I assure you – you get no job, no school and no future. If you do well, the world is your oyster. So, don't slip, not even once, or there will be no oyster, just slush."

A shiver ran through all of us as with that quote the professor slammed the duster on the desk and walked away in a cloud of chalk.

I think Alok picks up a word and uses it too much, which ruins the effect. There were too many 'damns' in his dialogue.

"Then drop it. Anyway, you got the highest amongst us. So, be happy."

"Happy? Yes, I am happy. The average is eleven, and someone got seventeen. And here I am, at damn seven. Yes, I am happy my damn *Terminator* ass," Alok scoffed.

I told you, Alok ruins the effect. I wanted to tell him that he should stop 'damn' right now but something told me he would not appreciate the subtleties of cursing right now.

"What? What did you just say?" Ryan said, keeping his spoon down on the plate, "Did you say *Terminator*?"

"Yes. It was a stupid idea. *Your* stupid damn idea," Alok said.

Ryan froze. He looked at Alok as if he was speaking in foreign tongue. Then he turned toward me. "You heard what he said? Hari, you heard? This is unbelievable man."

I had heard Alok, nothing being the matter with my eardrums but I wasn't paying attention to anything apart from keeping count of the 'damns'.

"Hari, you think I screwed up the quiz?" Ryan asked slowly.

I looked at Alok's and Ryan's faces in quick succession. "Ryan, you got three. You still need me to tell you that you screwed up?" I counter-questioned, mediating on something I did not understand yet.

"No. I mean Alok is saying I screwed up the quiz for both of you because I took you to the movie. You think so or...?"

"That is not what I said..." Alok interrupted even as Ryan raised his hand to indicate silence.

I understood Ryan's question now, but I did not know how to answer it, without taking sides.

"But how does that...."

"No, Hari tell me. Is that what you expect your best friends to say?" Ryan asked.

"It is not important. And besides, you did not drag us forcibly to see that crap movie," I said, reminding myself to never see sci-fi again.

Ryan was satisfied with the answer. He relaxed his raised hand and smiled, "See, there you go."

"But Alok is right too. We should have a limit on the fun factor. You can't screw with the system too much, it comes back to screw you – the quiz is an example."

"Thank you sir," Alok said, "That is exactly what I am saying."

Cool, I had managed to come out clean in this one. Sometimes, if you just paraphrase everyone's arguments, you get to be the good guy.