

SIXTEEN



Romance is contagious. All this talk of love and girls found many takers in the barracks. Maybe it had something to do with the season. Most cadets had a crush on some girl and now they began reviving their interests. I found myself working up my resolve to ring up the girl I ached for.

One Sunday morning, I finally walked to the phone booth, steeling myself against all odds. Nandini and I had been friends ever since I learnt to walk. Our fathers were colleagues and our mothers belonged to the same gossip group. After years of being neighbours, we were driven apart by the exigency of her father's career, which took them to another region of the country.

When I returned from the NDA after my training, I found that the family had relocated. I had been looking forward to taking our relationship to the next level and it broke my heart when I found that they had moved. It took immense persuasion and a hefty bribe to make my sister part with Nandini's phone number.

None of this was known to my gang, of course. Even a whiff about my love life would have resulted in merciless ragging. Perhaps it was Maachh's mooning that sparked off my dormant emotions. It spurred me to make the long delayed call to Nandini.

Back then, all calls had to be made in the STD booth on the campus. The first come, first serve system (FCFS) didn't work here. Rather it was seniority that worked. As I stood in the queue snaking up to the phone booth, I rehearsed my words. All through the evening, I had gone through every possible opening sentence but none of them seemed satisfactory. Finally, I decided to approach her in a straightforward manner. Damn it, we were childhood friends. Wouldn't she know that my feelings had changed from friendship to love in the past few years? Wasn't that a logical progression?

An uncomplicated approach – 'I am Nikhil. Remember me?' – would be the best opening line, I decided. No frills and no risks. Either she would gush at hearing from an old friend or cold-shoulder me. If she snubbed me, all I had to do was to end the call on a friendly note.

My heart was beating erratically as I entered the booth. Despite all the rehearsals, panic struck as I dialled her number. I put the phone back on its

cradle and wiped my sweaty hands on the seat of my trousers and waited for my heartbeat to normalize. The thumping on the booth door by impatient cadets galvanised me into action. I dialled the number once again and waited. Tension gripped me like a vicious anaconda. My mouth went dry as the tinny sound of ringing echoed in my ears.

‘Hello,’ her voice had the same dulcet notes I remembered. ‘Hello,’ she repeated but my tongue rolled into a ball. The muscles in my shoulders had bunched up in tight, painful coils.

‘Prank call,’ I heard her telling someone as she hung up.

The thumping continued outside... ‘Hurry up or get out,’ hollered a waiting cadet.

I dialled again and held the receiver stiffly in my perspiring hand. ‘Hellooooo,’ her voice sounded annoyed. Was I disturbing her?

A tremulous ‘hello’ was all I could manage.

‘Who is it?’ she asked.

‘Nik... Nik... Nikhil,’ I stammered. Drawing a deep breath I continued hurriedly before she could hang up on me, ‘Can you recall the name? I am Nikhil, your neighbour.’ My voice sounded strange – teetering towards a treble, it flickered like a candle on a stormy night.

A few seconds passed. I could hear her brain ticking. In the meantime, I shook my neck to release the bunched-up muscles around my shoulders and slackened my grip on the receiver. The mirror before me showed a nervous and sweaty chap on the verge of collapsing.

‘You are Dutta uncle’s son?’ Some sign of recognition, at last! The breath I had been holding for a while whooshed out loudly.

‘Right! We were neighbours.’ My enthusiasm carried the conversation forward.

‘Where are you and how come you are calling me?’

‘I am at the Indian Military Academy, training to be an officer,’ my confidence

was growing by the minute. ‘Last month, when I went home for the break, I learnt that you had relocated. Fortunately my sister had your home number. She gave it to me.’

She drew a deep breath and I waited for her to squeal excitedly. In my dreams it had always been that way.

‘Oh, I didn’t know you were in the IMA.’ Her voice was cool, calm, and composed. ‘How is everyone at home? It’s nice to hear from you after such a long time.’

Just nice! She didn’t gush or squeal. I was disappointed.

Outside the booth, Kaka, the big bully from Naushera Company, began raining blows on the flimsy door. For added effect, he threatened me with his fists.

‘I have wanted to speak to you for a long time but I didn’t have your phone number,’ I gushed.

‘Now that you have the number, you must keep in touch,’ she suggested.

The thumping on the booth door was getting louder and I could barely hear her voice. If I didn’t get out in another minute, I knew that Kaka would storm in and throw me out of the booth.

‘Look, I have to go now. I will call you again,’ I said, my heart singing with pleasure. ‘Tomorrow...’ my voice tapered off uncertainly.

‘I’ll wait for your call,’ she promised.

She said she would wait for my call. She was interested. I could have kissed the instrument in ecstasy if the bully was not loitering outside. Instead, I emerged from the booth and allowed myself a whoop of joy, oblivious of the curious looks I was receiving.

My grin extended from ear to ear. The world looked a much better place, the leaves greener and the sky more blue. Whistling a tune, I sauntered into the cafeteria to allow my brain and body to recover from the after-effects of the gushing adrenaline. It was time to mull over the conversation. Ordering a soft drink, I relaxed, my thoughts centred on Nandini.

With love having touched my heart, I succumbed to the luxury of daydreaming. I wandered through fantasy land. It was a voyage like no other. I inspected the surroundings through rose-tinted glasses, seeing things that didn't exist. A full-blown moon, twinkling stars, ruby red roses, and shimmering butterflies occupied my mind instead of the shabby furniture and noisy cadets who sat in the cafe. Nandini filled my mind – her thick and wavy hair tumbling to her hips, the arched brows bridging the ocean in her eyes. I could see her rosebud mouth unfurling in a smile while her thick eyelashes drooped sexily over her almond-shaped eyes.

‘Is this seat taken,’ a voice disturbed my thoughts. Looking up I saw Shamsheer, aka Mooli, towering over me. A lovely damsel with magnetic eyes stood with him. Although my thoughts were occupied by Nandini, I couldn't help noticing her eyes that flickered around the hall. Sometimes grey, sometimes green, and sometimes blue, they defied colour coding. I am a guy who doesn't like uncertainties of any kind. For me black is black and white is white; grey zones don't sit easy on me. Her eyes left me cold. She was a stunner. There was no doubt about it. Her voluptuous figure was the kind that would make Maachh drool. With a peaches-and-cream complexion and a profile like Mumtaz Mahal, she looked as though she had stepped out of a Mughal miniature.

What was Mooli doing with such a beautiful girl? He was not the kind that girls looked at, let alone befriended. It was a Sunday morning and the cafe was brimming with energetic cadets engaged in cheerful debates and banter. Wednesdays, Saturdays, and Sundays brought many pretty women to the academy. The cafeterias brimmed with people and colour. I gestured for Mooli to make himself comfortable.

‘Hey, everything alright with you, I hope. You look like you have been visited by Lady Macbeth.’

Damn Mooli, I cursed under my breath. He had been reading the Bard again. Ever since he had joined the academy, the Jat, realising he needed to brush up his English, had been reading all kinds of books, including massive volumes of Shakespeare's works. The guy was on a self-improvement trip. It didn't stop there. The clown's need to test the newfound knowledge was a pain for all his course mates, especially when he began mouthing Shakespeare. Depending on what he had been reading the previous night, some days it was the dialogues of Shylock from Merchant of Venice and on others it was Puck from A Midsummer

Night's Dream. Today it was Macbeth. Clearly, he was trying to impress the girl by quoting the Bard.

‘Shut up, Shamsheer,’ I rebuked, not willing to listen to his nonsense.

‘Alright, alright! No need to get testy. What are you doing here all alone?’ Mooli drawled. ‘Where are your pals?’

He was trying out a new accent, I noticed. There was a hint of an American twang. It was a sure sign that the buffoon had been watching too many American movies when he wasn't reading Shakespeare.

‘I abandoned them this morning since I was waiting for you,’ I snapped.

My sarcasm was lost on the thick-headed baboon. He preened and grinned in a lopsided manner, another sign he had been watching an American movie.

The girl beamed, her eyes glittering like jewels. I blinked to ward off their brilliance and glared at Mooli.

‘Oh, this is Nilofer. She is studying commerce. Stays in the hostel....’

Where and how did Mooli come across the girl? She was a rare specimen; very different from the beauties that frequented our academy.

Once the introductions were over, the two of them turned their back on me and began whispering sweet nothings to each other. Their eyes locked, they ignored me. I strolled out of the cafeteria intending to share the news with my pals.

Back at the barrack, I narrated the details of my run in with Mooli and Nilofer to my gang of four, carefully keeping Nandini a secret. They were overjoyed to hear the news.

‘No wonder, he has been slinking away on Sundays, spruced and smelling of expensive aftershave,’ said Porky.

‘The scoundrel!’ exclaimed Maachh, ‘How did he manage to find the girl?’

‘You will have to ask him.’

‘I intend on doing so.’

Maachh and Porky sauntered towards the cafeteria. Sandy and Zora joined them soon after. Mooli was in for trouble.

Grinning to myself, I retired to my cabin. For the moment I needed to return to my thoughts of Nandini.

As expected, the four fellows pounced upon Mooli as soon as he swaggered back to the barracks after a couple of hours. Attracted by the noise, I joined the melee. It was going to be fun watching the Jat being interrogated.

‘So, who is this Mumtaz Mahal, sorry Nilofer?’ Maachh was the first one to question Mooli.

‘The girl with colourful eyes,’ Porky clarified.

‘How did you get to meet such a beauty?’ enquired Sandy.

‘And we took you to be a serious and ambitious guy, focussed on bagging the Sword of Honour,’ Zora’s voice was sarcastic.

Mooli, aware that the gang wouldn’t let go of him till they had extracted every bit of information, decided to confess.

‘Okay guys, here’s the story,’ he began, clearing his throat ceremoniously. ‘About three weeks ago I was at the English Book Depot to buy a copy of Macbeth. While browsing through the books I noticed this beautiful girl who was trying to reach for a book on the upper shelf.’

‘... and she couldn’t reach it,’ supplied Maachh.

‘I did what any Gentleman Cadet was likely to do. I took it out for her.’

‘Obviously.’ The gang of four shook their head seriously. ‘We would have done the same.’ They smirked.

‘She smiled and thanked me. Just as I moved to the other end of the book shelf, she pulled out another book from a big stack and the entire pile collapsed,’ Mooli looked dreamy.

‘Oh, no.’

Clearing his throat, the Jat continued: ‘Once again, I rose to the occasion.’

‘Naturally!’

The chaps were mocking him but Mooli was not bothered.

‘She looked embarrassed at the mess she had created. Feeling sorry for her, I rushed to her aid. Thereafter, I helped her put the books back on the shelves.’

‘None of the salesmen were around, I guess,’ interjected Sandy, mockingly. ‘They have a strange habit of disappearing at a crucial time.’

‘Like in the movies,’ Maachh butted in.

‘How romantic!’ exclaimed Zora.

‘Will you guys let me speak?’ Mooli was irritated by the interruptions.

‘No more disruptions, guys! Let him speak,’ ordered Sandy, winking at the others. ‘Let the love story continue.’

They let out a collective sigh and Mooli continued: ‘Well, she looked at me with her blue eyes. On second thought, they are grey.’ He paused thoughtfully. ‘I think they are green; anyway whatever colour her eyes are, I felt the world stopped spinning around me. It seemed like I had been hit between my sternums.’

‘Sternum?’ Porky interrupted.

Sandy and Zora exchanged amused glances.

‘She thanked me and moved to the next shelf. Not wanting any more accidents, I followed her and we spoke about books. I asked her if she had read Shakespeare’s Macbeth. She hadn’t. I told her what it was about and that I was looking for a copy.’

‘Did she buy a book?’ Porky was curious. ‘Or did she upset some more book shelves?’

Throwing a disdainful look at him, Mooli warned: 'Don't interrupt. To reply to your query she bought a book on Kashmir.'

'Kashmir?'

'The girl was very helpful. She scoured the entire shop till she found a copy of Macbeth and handed it to me.' He took out his handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his brows. 'By the way Niloo is from Kashmir,' he added.

'Niloo, ahem,' Zora coughed meaningfully. The infection spread and everyone began coughing. When the coughs subsided, Mooli continued dreamily: 'Well, we walked into the book shop's cafe. It is one of those coffee-cum-book shops, where you sit and browse while enjoying a cup of coffee,' he explained as though we had never entered the place.

'Carry on buddy,' encouraged Porky.

'Well, we were sitting at different tables and browsing through the books. I ordered a cup of coffee for myself. As an afterthought I ordered a cup of coffee for her...'

'Being a gentleman and a cadet,' added Sandy. His eyes twinkled mischievously.

'Yes, being a gentleman and a cadet,' Mooli nodded seriously. 'Well, she walked up to me to thank me and sat down at my table. When two people are sharing a table, conversation is bound to happen. One thing led to another. She asked my name and I asked hers. She already knew I was from IMA.'

'With your haircut, it doesn't require a Poirot to work things out,' said Sandy.

'What is Poirot?' asked Porky.

'It is not "what" but "who" is Poirot,' remarked Sandy.

'Ok, who is Poirot? Is he from the academy?'

'Shut up!' Maachh was getting impatient.

'She told me she's studying at a local college and her parents are in Kashmir. We discovered a lot of common interests.'

‘You mean she also reads Shakespeare to improve her knowledge,’ asked Maachh.

This time Mooli caught on. He glared at the Bong.

Turning to the others, he said: ‘Actually she did most of the talking.’

‘Naturally, you being dumbstruck by her grey, green, and blue eyes, you only nodded your head, I guess,’ Zora teased.

Mooli ignored the barb and said: ‘Well one thing led to another. She suggested that we meet again and so we met the next Sunday for coffee. The following Sunday we had dinner together. In fact, we have been meeting regularly for the past three Sundays. Niloo wanted to visit the academy, so I brought her here today.’

‘So, how far has the affair gone?’ as usual Maachh was brimming with curiosity. ‘I mean, smooching stage or...’ he glanced around meaningfully and winked, ‘... or proceeded even further?’

‘Don’t ask idiotic questions,’ scolded Mooli. ‘You wanted to know how I had met her and I told you everything. Now, if you will excuse me. I have to run a few errands.’

He sauntered off, whistling tunelessly. We were flummoxed. No one had imagined him to have a romantic cell in his heart.