



Penguin

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I Never Thought I Could Fall in Love



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PENGUIN BOOKS

I NEVER THOUGHT I COULD FALL IN LOVE

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To Friendship ...

The Present

I reached the shop, bought half a bottle of whisky and a plastic glass and poured out a peg. Suddenly, a guy joined me at the table. I looked at him and instantly recognized the face. He introduced, or should I say reintroduced, himself to me. 'Hey kid! Remember me? I am Ali Bhai, the man whose money you and your bastard friend stole. Did you think you could escape me? *Haan*? You will not go back alive today. Give me my money right now or get ready to break some bones.'

He tossed the whisky from the glass at my face. I was taken aback. My guts, strengthened by the whisky I had already consumed, enabled me to reply that I would not be able to return his money at that moment. He punched me as soon as he heard that. I fell to the ground and his people began to kick me. I shouted for help but there was no one around. My nose was bleeding and my lower lip was cut. When Ali Bhai realized that I would not be able to return his money, he asked his henchmen to kill me. I was helpless. His men held me by the collar and pushed me towards a tree trunk. A big man holding a knife in his hands faced me and I knew that my end was near.

I closed my eyes and suddenly saw the faces of the people I loved the most. I saw my dad at his desk, mom cooking in the kitchen, my sister Neetu watching *saas—bahu* serials, Mickey winking at me, Boxer licking my face and Monica dancing with me on the beach. Tears streaked my cheeks and I desperately wanted another chance to tell all these people how much I loved them, but it was too late. The tall, dark guy was approaching me with the knife.

As he moved forward, visions of my life thus far, floated before me ...

The Past

My First Girlfriend

December 2002. A cold winter evening in Patiala, a small city in north India.

'Ronnie ... Ronnie ... Where are you beta? Come down for dinner.'

The neighbours could hear my mother, but I did not respond, choosing to pretend to sleep instead. I had had an argument with Dad that afternoon when he had caught me flirting on the phone with Sonal, my girlfriend. Dad had listened to my conversation on the extension and now, there was nothing left to hide.

Slow love numbers by Kishore Kumar filled the air and dim red lights added to the romance.

'Bhaiyya ... Mum is calling you for dinner and Dad is getting angry.' I looked up as Neetu stood at the door awaiting my reply.

'Just tell them that I don't want to eat. I want to sleep now,' I said to avoid my parents.

'Hmmm ... as you wish ... Goodnight then!' she replied as she rushed down to the dining room.

The clock struck midnight. Sleep was nowhere in sight since hunger pangs racked my body. When I could ignore this no longer, I went downstairs so that I could munch on something and get some sleep.

I tiptoed to the kitchen. Though it was cold, I chose not to wear slippers to avoid making any noise. I reached the refrigerator and opened it. Its light made visible all the other things in the kitchen.

A delicious chocolate cake lay in the fridge. There was a note as well.

'Son, I know you are hungry. This is your favourite cake and I'll not tell Dad that you had it late at night. Rush back to your room now because I know you are not wearing your slippers. Love, Mummy.'

I smiled instantly and whispered, 'I love you Mummy.'

No one can understand you better than your mother!

The cake was really delicious and eventually, I could not keep my eyes open any longer. I dozed off as soon as I hit the bed.

The alarm woke me up at 5 a.m. I turned it off and went to the bathroom. The cold toilet seat gave me goose bumps and I jumped, cursing myself for such an inhuman, miserable routine. I knew I had to hurry, otherwise I wouldn't get a seat next to Sonal at the tuition.

Fifteen minutes later, I was out on my dad's old scooter, heading for my class. But I was late as usual and most of the seats were already occupied. I took the last seat. The class began but I was looking for a particular girl—my girl. I noticed her in the front row of the class. I smiled broadly.

Sonal was looking as striking as ever! She was a girl with an attitude. She preferred salwar-suits to western wear. The small mole near her upper lip enhanced her beauty.

Suddenly I heard my name. The teacher was addressing me. 'Ronnie, I don't know how you can extract something funny from mathematics. Would you like to share it with the rest of the students?' he asked. He knew I had been staring at the prettiest girl in the class.

I blushed as everyone looked at me. Then I uttered the most commonly used apology, 'Sorry sir!' It always works, you see, and then, the class continued.

I went back to my thoughts.

I had to take the entrance exam for engineering in the coming months. Both my parents were doctors by profession but I found biology to be a difficult subject. My dad had always imagined me wearing a white coat with a stethoscope dangling down my neck. This was not unusual, as most of his colleagues' children had opted to study medicine.

I was brilliant in mathematics and had scored full marks in my Class X exam. My mother supported my endeavours and that's how I landed in this classroom. For the first six months my routine involved tuitions and school and then, studying late at night. I even had to skip cricket—my passion!

Then I got introduced to the MASTI group, formed by three of the most happening boys in school—Mohit, Saurabh and Ajay. This group was notorious for being involved in troublesome activities. They were usually seen in an open jeep at all events in the city. Before I knew it, I was the fourth member of the group. That was the turning point in my life. I started skipping tuitions to go for movies and visit pubs.

Patiala is known for the Patiala peg and its youth. The Patiala peg is famous as the largest measure for liquor all over the world and Patiala's youth are known for their capacity to down the former.

'Come on, have a sip. Be a man, Ronnie.'

I emptied the glass of liquor at one go. Everyone was stumped. And then, the room echoed with the sound of applause and praise. I was on cloud nine as if I had won gold at the Olympics.

It was around that time that Sonal entered my life. She attended the same tuition class as I did. I liked her and would follow her home every day on my scooter.

She must have noticed but she ignored me in the beginning. Then gradually, as she got used to my presence, she'd give me a smile every now and then. I became bolder and wanted her telephone number next. It was not a difficult task for I copied it from the attendance register at our tuition class.

I remember the first time I proposed to a girl—that too, on the telephone.

'Sonal ... hi ... it's Ronnie ... I am in your maths tuition class. Please don't hang up. I just want to meet you once. At Club 16 ... 5.30 sharp ... I will be waiting ... Please do come ... and it's my birthday tomorrow ... Bye.'

It was not my birthday the next day. I had lied because I could not think of a better way to get her to come. I was not even sure if she would come.

She came, not alone—to my disappointment—but with her friend, Sakshi. They joined me at the table. She had brought me a gift. A musk deodorant. We exchanged anxious looks and sat down.

'Why do you want to be my friend? What do I have that other girls don't?' This was her first question.

'Which girls are you talking about?'

'I am talking about the other girls in the tuition class. Why are you not interested in them?'

I didn't know what to say and came out with a funny reply. 'I don't know what has happened to me. I am not able to concentrate on my studies. I see you everywhere. I really want to be successful in life. Do you want to be the reason for my failure? If no, then, please say "Yes" and accept my friendship.' I blurted out. Inside, I felt like an utter fool but I tried to keep a straight face.

She stared at me for fifteen seconds and then burst out laughing. Even her friend was laughing. I knew the answer was a positive and resounding yes.

I had not been earnest in my confession; those words had not come from my heart. But there was no guilt ...

My first love story had started.

We used to meet often after tuitions in the numerous restaurants of the city.

Patiala is deemed the royal city of Punjab. So there are many beautiful forts that have been converted into offices and museums. People rarely visit these museums nowadays and most of them who do are couples like us. Sonal and I used to skip school and would go to these museums to spend hours in their gardens.

It was one such Saturday when we were sitting in the garden that there was a sudden downpour. We ran for shelter but all we could manage was an old pipeline that pumped water into the lake in Sheesh Mahal. The lake was dry now because some people had attempted to commit suicide in the lake and there had been problems regarding the proper management of the property.

There was no one around except the two of us. We were so close to each other that I could see the raindrops glistening on her face. Her lips were trembling. I could feel her warm breath on my face. Her white shirt was wet enough to reveal what was underneath it.

My heart beat faster than normal. I was worried that the security guard would catch us. And I was also excited because Sonal was the first girl with whom I had become so close. My teenage hormones were aroused.

'Sonal, I love you.' This was all that I could say at that moment. I kissed her on the forehead and she closed her eyes. I kissed both her eyes as she hugged me tight. I don't remember when our lips locked for my first kiss!

I was happy and I boasted about this to my friends in the evening. They demanded a party and we had a beer each. Of course my first kiss deserved a celebration.

Time was passing and I was unaware of its importance. We often tend to get caught up with insignificant things only to lament the loss of time later.

Suddenly, I realized that the mathematics class was over and everyone was leaving the room. I picked up my bag and left the classroom. Sonal was smiling at me but we had not made our affair open to people so we did not meet in public.

'Hey, blanket boy,' she teased me while passing by and I smiled as I recalled how I had got the name. After our meeting at Sheesh Mahal, we began seeing each other more often. Our timings were such that there was no way we could be caught.

We would meet at 4 a.m. Both of us would lie about an extra tuition early in the morning. On those days, we would leave our homes when our parents were fast asleep. I would take a blanket from home each time and pick up Sonal from a milk booth near my house. The milk booth would be the only place

open at that unearthly hour, and after parking her vehicle over there, we would move towards the outskirts of the city on my dad's old scooter.

We had found an old, abandoned house on the outskirts of the city. Though it was a bit scary, it was the perfect place of rendezvous for a couple like us—there were no distractions. The blanket was used as a sheet lying on which we would explore each other's bodies. It seemed a bit awkward at first but neither of us asked any questions. Our mouths were busy with other things. We never thought about the consequences if we were caught. I did not have the guts to cross the limit. Perhaps destiny had some other plans with regard to ending my virginity.

We would usually return home by 6 a.m. as I would have to return the blanket to its place. But one day, both of us fell asleep after making out, until the sunlight coming in from a broken window woke us up. We panicked on seeing the time as it was already 8. We wore our clothes and hurried out. I first dropped Sonal at the milk booth and headed home. I realized that I could not take the blanket back at that hour. I could not take it to the tuition either. So I decided to drop it at my barber's shop and told the barber that I would pick it up later.

It didn't take much time for Mom to realize that the blanket was missing and she had everyone looking for it but without success. No one was able to solve the case of the missing blanket.

I gave up the thought of ever getting that blanket back home. When I didn't pick up the blanket from the barber's, he gave it to a beggar sitting outside his shop. My dad would stare at that blanket every time he went for a haircut but would not say a word. The mystery of the lost blanket never really got solved. When I told Sonal the story of the lost blanket, she began to call me 'Blanket Boy' as a joke.

The engineering entrance exam was near and Dad wanted me to qualify for no less an institute than the IIT. I had to prove myself especially as I had chosen my career against his choice.

I tried to concentrate and study hard but every time I did so, I was aware of how close the exams were and how ill-prepared I was. I even skipped my dates with Sonal and missed some of the latest movies.

Judgement day arrived in May and I tried to give my best shot at the entrance exam. The mathematics section was good—thanks to the solid foundation from my tenth-standard exams. The physics portion was average. Chemistry was where I fared the worst. Those chemical reactions and irritating nomenclatures always puzzled me.

The results were declared after a week. My state-wide rank was 2527. This was not bad at all considering the little time I had spent in preparation. But it was very clear that IIT featured nowhere on the horizon. Dad was upset and I was worried too.

At night I would ask myself, 'What does my heart want? Ronnie ... you could have done much better. Instead, you have opted to spoil your life. You are such a fool, man. But you can still prove yourself. Go ahead with engineering. Prove your mettle and make your parents proud,' my conscience told me.

I really wanted to leave home and stay in a hostel. I was fed up of my daily fights with Dad. He was from a middle-class family who had to work hard to be in this position in life, which set him apart from his siblings. So he always expected me to be sincere in my studies. However, I was not a serious student; I wanted to enjoy my life to the fullest. Dad tried to explain to me, in the friendliest way possible, how the thoughtless behaviour of my teenage years would affect the rest of my life. But at that

time, I was too immature to realize that my actions had consequences, which I would have to face some day.

And I was equally confused about love. Sonal had secured admission to an arts college in Delhi and was moving there with her family. Could I live without her? Was she not a part of my life? Was it just an infatuation? Did love exist?

What about the MASTI group? Would I be able to live without my pals?

And, Mom and Dad? Wouldn't I miss them? There were lots of questions but I had no answers.

I finally took admission in Punjab University at Chandigarh. I was just an innocent boy unaware of what he would come up against in the future. I was afraid but confident that I could prove myself. But would I be able to get the answers to all my questions? God willing, yes.

In my heart I knew that the Sonal chapter had definitely ended, and that too on a very sad note. When I decided to leave Patiala, I had to give Sonal a reason to break off with me. I avoided meeting her as frequently as before. Whenever I was with her, I did not talk much. This was to gradually break it to her that I was no longer as interested as I had been earlier.

One day she asked me to meet her at Sheesh Mahal as she wanted to discuss something really important. I made excuses to avoid the meeting but she persuaded me to meet her.

Sonal told me, 'Ronnie ... I love you more than anything else in this world. I don't know if I will be able to ever forget you. I know you are not interested in me anymore. I don't want to hang on to you and irritate you. I am leaving for Delhi with my family next week to pursue my studies there.'

I listened to her silently. She took out a piece of cardboard from her bag. She had cut it into the shape of a heart and wrote, 'I love you, Ronnie' on it. She gave it to me and requested me to keep it as a token of her love. I could not prevent my tears and we hugged each other tightly. I requested her not to go to Delhi but she did not budge. We kissed each other madly and bade farewell.

For the next few days, I felt really miserable because I had hurt Sonal. I stayed in my room and watched television all day long. I did not feel like going out and enjoying myself with my friends. I wanted to leave Patiala as quickly as possible. I wanted to start a new life with new friends and new people around me, so that I would not feel guilty about ditching Sonal. And that was what I chose to do.

Ragging and Mickey's Revenge

I completed all the registration formalities for the college and the hostel. Dad, who had come with me for the orientation programme, seemed happy that my life had found direction. He gave me a tight hug and I still remember his advice to me at that time.

'Son, life is very strange. Don't try to find too many "ifs" and "buts" in it. Just enjoy it as it comes. And do take out some time to pray to Waheguru. He should be remembered both during your happy and sad moments. God bless you, son.' These words were too deep for me to understand then, but as I was to discover, life teaches you lessons in its own way.

Dad dropped me off at the hostel. The attendant of the hostel told me that my room was on the third floor. As I reached the room, I saw a guy was already there, unpacking his things.

I introduced myself.

'Hi, I am Romil Khanna. You may call me Ronnie. I am from Patiala.'

'Hello, I am Siddharth Kapoor. You may call me Sid. I am from Hissar.'

I took a good look at Sid as we introduced ourselves. I noticed that he was a bit plump, dusky in complexion and had pierced both ears. Attired in a simple red t-shirt and grey formal trousers, his appearance was not that of a friendly dude. He looked like an active member of a village wrestling club.

'I have taken the cupboard to the left and kept my things in it. You can take the one to the right. We can keep the extra bedding in the middle cupboard.' Sid announced as if I had to agree with his decision. I quietly emptied my bag. I noticed Sid had already written his name on his cupboard with a black marker.

My cupboard was divided into four shelves. I kept Guru Nanak Devji's picture on the second shelf from the top. I also kept Mom's, Dad's and Neetu's pictures alongside it, as well as other small accessories, such as stationery, goggles, toothbrush and toothpaste. Then I placed my clothes on the shelf below. Shoes, slippers and the empty bag were dumped on the lowest shelf. The topmost shelf was left empty for my books.

It was already 8 p.m. by then. I changed into a white kurta-pyjama and asked Sid to join me for dinner in the mess. Sid was busy writing something in his diary but soon joined me.

Our room was on the third and topmost floor of the hostel. As we walked to the mess, Sid warned me about the ragging practised by the seniors. He told me that we didn't have any option but to accept what they said.

As we passed a corridor on our way to the mess, I could hear loud hooting and shouting while music blared from different rooms. There were some vulgar comments written on the doors of some rooms.

My heart was beating fast as I expected a senior to catch me. But we reached the mess without any incident. I sighed with relief. However, there were other things to deal with. The mess was full so we had to wait our turn. We stood in a corner and watched the goings-on. Whoever said that food should be eaten in a quiet atmosphere had not seen a hostel mess.

Everyone was shouting and laughing while dining. Some people were shouting at the mess boys to bring one thing or another. The mess boys wore a uniform of navy blue trousers, blue striped shirts and navy blue aprons.

There was the chief mess boy, who stood near a shelf, writing notes in his register. I noticed that he gave orders to the other mess boys and noted down the extras each student ordered. Neither did anyone notice us standing there nor did they finish eating quickly to vacate the seats.

After waiting for what seemed like six hundred seconds—I kept count—we got a seat. A mess boy offered us a thali each. The thali had four sections—one each for vegetables, curd, chapattis and rice. There was a bottle of vinegar and a box of mixed pickles on the table.

'Can you please pass me the pickle?' I asked one of the guys sitting opposite me.

As he passed me the pickle he murmured, 'Get ready to have some pickle at night too.'

This was a warning for what was to follow and we knew there was trouble. Anyway, dinner was excellent and there was icecream for dessert.

The TV room was adjacent to the mess. I was just about to enter the TV room when a senior came up and told me that first-year students were not allowed in that room. Sid took my hand and dragged me towards the corridor.

Just when it seemed as if we were going to escape, we heard a voice, 'Hey fresher, come this side.' We walked to his room. He ordered, 'Inside, I said. Now ...'

We entered the room and were amazed to see a thick haze of smoke. Some boys were drinking, sitting on the bed and chairs. There were four more boys standing half naked in one corner.

'Two more jokers,' one of the guys commented and everyone started to laugh.

'Come in front, you bastards,' they ordered.

There were three seniors. One of them was six-and-a-half feet tall and was wearing a black t-shirt and a pair of black pants. He resembled a Bollywood villain. Another was a Sardar in a blue turban and white kurta-pyjama. He was too busy drinking and didn't even bother to look at us. The third one was slim and small and was wearing a skin-tight t-shirt. He looked really funny in it and was shouting the loudest.

'Hey start introducing yourselves. You can choose your language. But your introduction will have to be in that language only. And if you make a mistake while introducing yourself, you will remove one piece of clothing and re-start the introduction. Am I clear?' We nodded to show we understood what he wanted.

Sid was asked to start by introducing himself and he chose to speak in our mother tongue. It seemed to be a good option at the time. He was soon reduced to his underwear. When he started speaking, he realized that he did not know the Hindi equivalent of many words. A smile dawned on the faces of the seniors present as they asked him to join the rest of the half-nude guys in the corner.

Now it was my turn. I preferred English, having seen Sid make errors. After all, 'Wise men learn by other men's mistakes, fools by their own!'

However, I made some mistakes because of my carelessness. I somehow managed to complete my introduction with the lower part of my attire in place. I was feeling good now and began to smile.

Suddenly the Sardar named Jassi—as I came to know when they began conversing with each other—(the slim one was Adi and the tall one was Kaali) ordered me to remove my pyjama to celebrate my victory. And then all of them started laughing loudly. It was not long before I joined my half-naked batchmates.

Before I could wonder what the next task was I heard my name being called.

'Oye Ronnie ... Come forward and select a partner.' I selected Sid and said sorry to him.

Adi drew two lines at a distance of two metres from each other on the floor. He kept a coin between the two lines and made us sit on our knees on either side.

We had to pass the coin across each other's boundary line without using our hands or feet. Instead we had to use the words 'Fuck you'.

We had to mouth the words and blow the coin across the opponent's line. We started.

'Fuck you.'

'Fuck you.'

'Fuck you.'

'Fuck you.'

Sid proved his strength at this game and won.

'Come on dance and celebrate Sid's victory,' Kaali shouted to the other guys.

All of a sudden all the nude guys started to dance. This was so hilarious. Soon the seniors turned up the volume of the music and joined in. All of us were dancing to Punjabi music. We seemed no less than a bunch of hired nude dancers, performing for our drunken seniors.

The clock struck 2 a.m. and the guys ordered us back to our rooms. I thanked god, wore my clothes and sped off to my room. I fell asleep as soon as I hit the bed.

This was my first day of life in a hostel.

The very next day, when we were getting ready for college, two more seniors came by. They introduced themselves as Ruchir and Harry. They came to tell us about the dress code for freshers. We had to dab a lot of oil on our heads and then press down the hair tightly with a comb. The shirt was to be completely buttoned and not tucked in. And we were supposed to wear sports shoes with formal trousers.

Since we had no other option but to accept their orders, we got ready the way they wanted. Needless to say, we looked like clowns!

There were parathas for breakfast and though they were not as good as Mom's we still ate to our heart's content.

I moved towards the college after breakfast. Since I reached the classroom late—nothing had changed since my school days—I managed a seat in the last row. I saw some other guys dressed like me and immediately identified them to be hostellers. While the teacher took the attendance, I tried to remember the names of the students and also checked out the girls.

There were a number of girls and some of them were quite good-looking. My eyes zeroed in on a girl named Monica as she answered the roll call. Dressed in a pink salwar-suit she looked beautiful with a

dimple on her left cheek. When the class started she tried to concentrate on the lecture while I concentrated on her.

The lecture was soon over and there was a break of five minutes. Many students tried to talk to each other. I was still looking at Monica. Soon, the next lecture began.

During the lunch break, as I went to the hostel for some food, a guy joined me.

'Hi, I am Mukul. Just saw you in the class. I am from Amritsar. My friends call me Mickey.'

He was six feet tall and healthily built. Bespectacled and with long hair parted at the centre, he seemed to be dressed differently. I introduced myself and soon we got talking. He seemed friendlier than Sid.

After the classes got over, I explored the city with Mickey. We went to the main market. The crowd was cool. Both of us talked about our backgrounds and discovered our views were very similar.

We had our dinner outside. It was 10 p.m. when we returned to the hostel. When I headed in the direction of my room, Mickey stopped me. He led me to another room instead, a room that was apparently locked. But Mickey gave one good shove to the door and it opened. He pushed the door back in place, the lock intact. At a cursory glance that room looked like it was locked from outside, so unoccupied. Mickey had devised that arrangement the previous day. He had spent some of his school years in a hostel so he was quite smart when it came to such tricks. He smiled broadly at me. He did not have a roommate yet so we had the room to ourselves. I changed into his shorts and soon we were fast asleep.

Mickey also informed me that there were eleven hostellers in the batch of fifty people, of whom three were from Bihar, one from Haryana and the rest were from Punjab. I was quite happy that I had made a good friend on the very second day of my college life.

The next morning, I walked off to my room to change for class. Sid seemed worried about me. He thought some seniors had ragged me the whole night. I assured him that I was fine.

After I freshened up we rushed to the college. As soon as I entered the classroom I found myself looking for Monica. She was sitting in the first row dressed in blue, looking even prettier.

I stopped dead in my tracks. Suddenly Mickey, who was standing behind me, gave me a push and I got a seat in the second row, just behind Monica. A girl sitting to my left spoke, 'Hey, do you have an extra pen?' I looked at her and gave her my pen. She was pretty, and looked rather sexy in a stretched red top on which was written HOLD ME in bold lettering. I was staring at them when Mickey whispered from behind.

'Hey, what are you looking at? Dumb ass. They won't get bigger if you stare at them. You have to work on them.'

I suddenly realized what I was doing. I shook myself and turned. The girl smiled and introduced herself. She was Payal, from Ludhiana. She had a figure similar to Britney Spears. I found myself hard-pressed when it came to making a choice between Monica and Payal. The latter's perfume was driving me crazy.

As the lectures went on, I came to know more about Payal. She was a rich industrialist's daughter and had been in Chandigarh only the last two years. She was living as a paying guest very close to our university. Even though she was so charming and friendly, I could not take my eyes off her chest and the letters there. I wished I could hold her.

Mickey teased me about my proficiency with girls. He was not a virgin, he said. He had many girlfriends. With a playboy like him praising my attempts at befriending the female sex, I felt good!

Ragging continued in the hostel. It was mandatory for a fresher to have an ID proof made out of sanitary pads. There was my passport-size photograph on the upper-right side of the pad. My name and room number followed with the signatures of well-known seniors residing in the hostel at the end. If that was not bad enough we had to get the ID cards laminated. It was such an embarrassing thing to do that we made sure to get it done from a shop outside the university.

We would often spend nights outside the hostel in the OAT—open air theatre—located inside the university campus. Other times Mickey and I would enter his room, which was locked from outside. One day, someone spread the news that an ex-student from the hostel was going to visit and so all the freshers were asked to be present. Mickey and I locked ourselves in his room, but at midnight we heard some people shouting outside the room. They were looking for us. One of them hit the door with anger and it slammed open. We were caught.

'So you bastards are hiding here. This is an old trick, kid. Baaba is calling you downstairs to join the grand ragging meet today.' I was a bit frightened but Mickey kept his cool and we followed them. We entered the dormitory as instructed. There was utter silence in the room and the dim red light made the ambience eerie. Some seniors were sitting on the bed and a plump, small Sardar was seated bang in the centre of the room. He had a long beard but did not wear a turban. He had on a vest that was torn in many places and his entire appearance was scary. Kaali was sitting behind him and looked every inch his bodyguard.

I knew that there was going to be some heavy-duty ragging in store for us. All of us were asked to introduce ourselves and show our ID proofs. We had had a lot of practice in terms of introducing ourselves and we passed this exercise with flying colours. The seniors were praised by Baaba for training us well.

Then, the first major task of the night—Kaun Banega Crorepati?—hosted not by the Big B but by Baaba, was announced. We were made to queue up and Baaba asked us some funny questions.

'How many girls are there in your class?'

'How many are eligible candidates for the post of "Sex bombs"?'

'How many couples are already there in your class?'

We were warned not to let the day scholars catch hold of any of the girls.

'How many of you masturbate more than five times a day?'

The questions were really funny but our answers were not well received. Soon he succeeded in getting us to strip to our underwear. By now, I was thinking that perhaps it would be best to roam around in one piece of underclothing if only to please our seniors. 'What a group of closet gays!' I thought to myself.

Once the striptease act was over, we were asked to get ready for the second task. The three guys from Bihar were asked to come to the centre of the room and sing some Bhojpuri song while the rest of us had to dance bhangra to it. It was really a funny sight. Baaba and the other seniors enjoyed themselves at our expense.

Then we were asked to line up in a train formation and march around the hostel grounds. Sid being the fattest of all was positioned in front like the engine. It was the weirdest and ugliest train I had ever seen and it proved to be a very embarrassing sight. I could not, however, resist smiling at this.

Suddenly Baaba called me aside while asking the rest to continue.

'Why are you laughing, bastard? Are we cartoons standing here?' he asked. I realized I had no way out other than to resort to the age-old apology but it didn't work. I was asked to wash off my smile.

'Smile Wash' in hostel terminology meant a certain process. I had to whack my ass with a slipper and ask it if it would dare to smile again. After doing it several times, one of the seniors asked my ass what it was saying. I assured him that it said that it would not smile again and I was permitted to rejoin the nude train.

Baaba had not finished yet! There was no doubt in anybody's mind as to why he was famous. We were in his room again and this time he asked Mickey to climb and perch himself atop the cupboard. I was not able to understand what he was getting at. Mickey followed the orders. Then, the task was explained to us.

Mickey had been asked to move to Shimla—his perch atop the cupboard—while the rest of us on the floor were in Chandigarh. We had to pretend as if a telephone conversation with him was underway. Mickey was a hotel owner in Shimla. We had to ask him the rates of prostitutes there and he was given the task of convincing us to come over by telling us how hot the prostitutes were.

Baaba was feeling sleepy by then and so the last task for the night was scheduled soon. He brought out a bra and panty from his bag. He asked Sid to come in front and wear these undergarments and sleep with him that night. Sid was selected solely because of his plump body and because his chest could be compared to a girl's! The rest of us were asked to leave.

Poor Sid! I pitied him. Sid started to cry. Baaba was drunk and shouted at him. Suddenly, Mickey came forward and told Baaba that he was willing to stay instead of Sid. Everyone was surprised at Mickey's guts. But Baaba agreed and we all returned to our rooms. I was really worried about Mickey and sleep seemed a distant possibility that night.

After half an hour, Mickey knocked on my door. I opened the room to see him grinning widely. He had beaten up Baaba and was bragging about it. In the meantime, Sid also got up and both of us listened to Mickey.

When everyone had left the room, Mickey had picked up the hockey stick and hit Baaba. Too drunk to resist, Baaba had toppled over. After beating up Baaba, Mickey had gone straight to the hostel attendant's office and called the warden. He informed him about the ragging being conducted by an outsider and told him how he had beaten the man. And now, here he was narrating the whole story to us.

At this juncture, Baaba came over with a bunch of seniors, looking for Mickey. All of them were holding hockey sticks and using abusive language. When they saw Mickey in our room they asked us to move away from him but here was our chance to display some unity and stand by our friend.

I don't know what came over me but I started the revolt and was soon joined by other batchmates who had collected by then to hear Mickey's story. The scene was slowly getting out of hand when the warden suddenly arrived with some security guards. The seniors tried to make a dash for it but Mickey and I were ready and waiting for Baaba.

The warden recognized him since he was an ex-student. There had been some complaints about him previously too but this time around he had been caught red handed, drunk and holding a hockey stick to hit the juniors.

The warden convinced us that he would be taken to the police this time. Mickey unexpectedly played the ultimate trick. To our astonishment, he hugged Baaba and told the warden that he was withdrawing his complaint. Everyone was quite astonished! The warden looked confused, but left soon, given that there was no written complaint against Baaba. Once he left, Baaba apologized to us.

Baaba told us that he was trying to shift abroad. A police case against him would have made acquiring a visa difficult. He was ashamed of his behaviour and announced openly that he was through with ragging the current batch of freshers. Everyone was happy and all the seniors and juniors hugged each other.

Baaba gave us another lecture on the need to maintain hostel unity. He said that while the day scholars managed with some good links in each department, the hostel inmates only had each other to help them out in every difficulty during their time in the hostel.

After the ragging got over, peace and quiet prevailed in the hostel. There was a sense of camaraderie among the freshers and the seniors that made things easier and much more pleasant.

Freshers Party: A Sexual Awakening

I did not get too many opportunities to get close to Monica, though I was always seeking one. Payal became a good friend though. Sometimes we even shared coffee in the college campus. She had her own group of friends outside the university and would visit discos and other hangouts frequently.

One day a group of seniors came to our class. They came to formally invite us for a freshers' party to be held in two weeks' time. We were all excited. The monotony of our routine would be broken and we had something to look forward to! In the days following the invitation, all we could talk about was the party.

Some of the guys planned to dress formally. Even Mickey was keen to dress in formal trousers and shirt. However, I had not decided what to wear. I somehow could not decide, and as the day came closer, I became worried. Payal solved my problem when she asked me to join her for a shopping trip.

When I told Mickey that I was going shopping with Payal, he encouraged me to take the relationship forward but to be careful to keep it under wraps. He felt that if we became known as a couple, it would be difficult for me to break off and move onto other women later. I felt that that was sound advice from a good friend.

Payal called me on the hostel telephone. The attendant woke me up and I hurried to answer the call. She asked me to come outside the university gates at 11 a.m. She would then pick me up on her Scooty. It was Saturday and the freshers' party was on Sunday at a local disco, Arizona.

I was excited. I took a quick shower and was with her in the next hour. She was wearing the same short top that said 'Hold me'. Since I sat behind her on the Scooty it was difficult to resist holding on to her. I held her by her waist but she didn't react. We did not talk much. A shiver ran down my spine when I accidently touched the bit of exposed skin between her tank top and jeans. It was so soft.

Soon, we had reached the market. After Payal had parked her vehicle we went on a shopping binge. I bought myself a new pair of trousers and Payal selected a shirt. I liked it but it was very expensive. I refused to buy it as it was out of my budget. But Payal paid for the shirt and gifted it to me. I tried very hard to stop her from paying but when she insisted, I accepted her gift.

Now we had to shop for her. We went to another mall famous for ladies' apparel. She selected a red top and a black skirt and then went to the trial room to change. I waited outside. She took a lot of time changing. I guess that figure-hugging top would have taken a lot of time to come off. She opened the door after ten minutes and I was unable to take my eyes off her. She looked like some Hollywood actress, no less. The dress had a plunging neckline and revealed a generous amount of her cleavage. It was also knotted at the left side of the waistline. Her skirt was also quite short, ending much above her

knees. Her legs were fully waxed and shone beneath the black skirt. I looked at her hungrily. She looked good enough to eat!

She smiled, awaiting my reaction. I joined the index finger and thumb of my right hand in a sign to indicate that she was looking gorgeous. She smiled, and I think she could easily read my mind. We finalized the clothes and decided on lunch. Since we were out together for the first time on her invitation, she opted to treat me to lunch.

We went to a local bistro, Hot Millions, which was famous for good fast food and high prices. We opted for Chinese food and started with manchow soup. I was unfamiliar with the names of the Chinese dishes on the menu, so I kept my mouth shut. She placed the order. Among all the dishes, only chilly chicken seemed familiar to me. We drank fresh lime juice with our lunch.

The food was lip-smackingly good!

Post lunch, we did some window-shopping and talked with each other. Suddenly she asked me, 'Ronnie, do you have a girlfriend?'

I was not ready for the question. I told her I did not but that I had had one in Patiala. I did so in order to let her know that I was not an ignorant guy. She told me that she had broken up with her boyfriend sometime ago.

I didn't want to return to the hostel. I knew that she would soon drop me back to the university. I was trying to think hard to devise an idea to make her stay for some more time. Such beautiful evenings are just not meant to end.

She gave me the idea instead. 'Hey, have you seen any new movies recently?'

'No. Can you accompany me to one right now if you are free? I have nothing to do in the hostel,' I replied. That sounded really desperate and my eyes fell on her lovely lips, hoping for a positive reply.

She gave me a broad smile and looked at her watch. There was still some time left for the next show of *Spiderman*. We hurried towards the theatre and were almost on time. I insisted on buying the tickets since this was my idea. I bought two tickets and soon we were seated in the theatre. I could barely concentrate on the movie. She was very close to me and I was looking at the ring on her finger.

After some time the scenario changed a bit. I put my arm around her and she placed her head on my shoulder. I guess we were already more than just friends but neither of us had spoken of our feelings to each other.

The movie was good. When we came out of the theatre it was already dark outside. Winter had arrived. She asked me to drive the Scooty and put her hands on my waist and after some time she hugged my back. I didn't react but my heart was beating faster. I could feel the softness of her ample bosom on my back as she breathed heavily.

I tried to drive slowly and through deserted roads but the university was not far away and soon we had reached. I put the Scooty on its stand. When we bid goodbye we hugged each other but she did not make eye contact with me.

At the hostel I looked around for Mickey. He was in the TV room. We were allowed to use all the hostel facilities after that ragging incident with Baaba. When he saw me, he smiled broadly. He was very eager to know all about my day.

We went to his room and I narrated the whole story. He liked what I had bought, especially the shirt.

'The sparrow is trapped in your net, dear. All you need to do is to wait for the right moment to strike,' Mickey said grinning. I smiled and we gave each other a high-five.

That night in bed, I wondered if I was doing the right thing by using her. But even my best friend Mickey was suggesting it to me. I was confused. I preferred instead to think about the party.

The next day, all the freshers in the hostel rushed around to get ready. People were ironing their clothes, getting a last-minute facial or using their hairdryers to straighten their curls. We were almost ready by 2 in the afternoon in time for the party. Mickey had borrowed a bike from one of our seniors and we headed to the destination. I soon realized that Mickey was taking me somewhere else. Before I could ask, he stopped the bike outside a liquor shop.

'How can you enjoy a party without booze?' he asked me. I smiled but it seemed risky to drink at the party. If we were caught, there could be big trouble. Mickey assured me that everything would be fine.

He bought a bottle of vodka. He explained to me that it is a transparent drink and mixes easily with any soft drink. Moreover, it has no odour, unlike whisky or beer, and is difficult to catch. Then he put the bottle in the inner pocket of his suit and we proceeded to the party. We reached the venue and were escorted in by some of the senior girls. They were looking prettier with loads of makeup.

The ambience inside the hall was very pleasant. While most of the guys were wearing suits, the majority of the girls were in saris and salwar-suits. I looked around for Payal while Mickey gave a waiter a hundred bucks and asked him to spike our Limca with vodka whenever we demanded.

I shook hands with my classmates and seniors. Suddenly, Monica came up to me. Her white salwarsuit made her stand out in the crowd.

I said hello and complimented her. 'You are looking beautiful today.'

She smiled broadly so that her dimple flashed on her cheek and replied, 'You mean I don't look beautiful every day?'

I was left speechless by her repartee. Mickey joined me.

'You never gave him a chance to compliment you earlier. I can bear witness to all the compliments you have received from him,' he added naughtily.

Monica looked at both of us in astonishment as she was not ready for such a response and then left, murmuring under her breath. I could not tell if she was angry or pleased to hear this.

Mickey winked and hugged me. I could easily make out that he had already had a couple of pegs. He signalled to the waiter and asked for a drink for me. The first peg was quite strong especially since I had not drunk in sometime.

After I was two pegs down, one of the seniors who was playing host, asked all of us to be seated. I sat next to Mickey. Payal was still nowhere to be seen. When the seniors were introducing themselves, I finally spotted Payal. She was wearing the outfit we had bought yesterday. She looked stunning and was the cynosure of all eyes.

The party had started full swing. There were games and even a fashion show where we had to take to the ramp while the seniors played a special song for each of us.

When it was my turn, they played Papa kehte hain.

I walked the ramp with a smile on my face.

Mickey's walk was quite impressive too. The swagger, the slight smile and the jacket placed on the shoulder were much appreciated by the audience. The song they had played for him was, *Pal bhar ke lie*

koi hume pyar kar le ... jhootha hi sahi.

There was a lot of hooting and many catcalls when Payal walked the ramp. Four boys and four girls were shortlisted to move to the next round, which was to be a question—answer round. The winners here would be adjudged Mr and Miss Fresher.

Mickey, Payal and I featured in the top eight.

It was time for the questions and I was a bit nervous. It was Mickey's turn first.

'Do you consider a live-in relationship acceptable in Indian society? Justify your answer with a proper reason.'

Mickey thought for a second and replied, 'I would prefer that it be accepted. I don't think there is anything bad in it. We call ourselves a developing nation and if we remain conservative and do not adapt to the changes wrought by time, then we will never be able to transform ourselves into a developed country. Moreover, the law also recognizes a live-in relationship if a guy and a girl are living together for a considerable period of time.'

Everyone began to applaud. This was exactly the answer people had expected from the 'Love Guru', as Mickey was known. I was really amazed to see how he had connected the issue of live-in relationships to the transformation of our country from a developing nation to a developed one. The answer was undeniably brilliant!

Then, it was my turn. 'Would you prefer a highly paid job abroad or an average salaried job in India? Justify your preference with a reason.'

I thought for two minutes. I closed my eyes and answered from the heart, 'I would prefer to stay in my country and take up a job with an average salary. This country has given me so much. I have grown up here, studied here and I love my culture. Now, when it is time to return the favour, I can't move abroad and be selfish.'

Every one applauded again. Payal took the mike after the rest of the shortlisted candidates had finished.

'Well if we dare you to woo a guy from your batch at this instant, how do you intend to do it?'

There was pin-drop silence in the hall and every person was looking intently at Payal. Her smile made it clear that she had accepted the challenge. She searched for a prey among the troupe of boys. I was busy tying my shoelace when out of the blue a pair of stilettos froze in front of me. I was not ready for this.

'Rommil,' called Payal. I looked up. All eyes shifted from Payal to me.

Payal said, 'Hey dude. I see you are good at tying shoelaces but alas I don't even know how to tie a knot. Will you do it for me?' she pointed at the back of her waist where the knot was undone.

I was dumbfounded and could not keep my eyes away from her waistline. I absolutely blanked out and began tying the knot around her waist with trembling hands.

She thanked me and started giggling. Everyone else began to laugh and admired Payal for her audacity.

The question was tricky but she had answered it very well. The question—answer round was over and all of us eagerly awaited the names of the winners.

Everyone had their fingers crossed. Payal would no doubt be crowned Miss Fresher. Her answer was brilliant and she looked every inch a sex goddess. However, there seemed to be tough competition

between Mickey and me, but it was unanimously decided that Mickey should be given the crown of Mr Fresher. I was really happy for him. Soon, both Mickey and Payal were crowned.

Suddenly, there was another announcement.

'There is one more award for Best Personality and that award goes to Mr Romil Khanna.' I was astounded and Mickey jumped down to escort me onto the stage. I was given a gift and Mickey cheered me on over the mike.

'Hip ... Hip ... Hurray.'

I congratulated Payal and she thanked me for helping her choose the dress. The party was getting louder now. Music was on full blast and everyone was on the dance floor shaking their hips to the numbers played by the DJ.

After some time I was tired, so I stopped to down a couple of pegs of vodka. Payal came to me and asked me what I was having. I told her that it was an alcohol-laced soft drink and narrated how Mickey and I had planned it out before reaching the party. She replied by saying that even she had tried this stunt sometime ago. I asked her if she wanted to join me and when she nodded her assent, both of us downed one peg after another. The drinks were definitely starting to take effect. I could see Mickey dancing madly.

Payal excused herself to visit the loo and Mickey made me join him on the floor. Monica was also there and was dancing very well to the Punjabi songs. As I had two left feet I just stood there staring at Monica. Seeing me watch her, she asked me to join in. I resisted and she pulled me by my hand. She taught me a step or two and I soon started enjoying myself.

Suddenly a waiter came to me and said that some girl wanted to talk to me outside the hall. I excused myself and went outside wondering who it could be. Payal was standing there. She was trembling and could barely keep from falling.

'I am not completely in my senses. Can you please escort me to my PG? I got my friend's car today,' she said. I asked her to wait while I informed Mickey.

I hurried inside the hall to find Mickey. He was dancing away with a group of girls. I pulled him aside and told him the situation. He smiled and took out something from his wallet and put it in my pocket. I didn't see what it was.

'You might need this brother!' he told me and asked me to go.

Payal was still waiting when I got outside. She pointed towards an Alto and handed me the keys.

I moved the car out of the parking lot and soon we were on our way to her room. She asked me to take the car to the university as she had to tell me something. I entered the university gates and parked the car in the parking lot. It was 8 p.m. already and a heavy mist was descending. I could not spot a parking attendant or a security guard. I parked the car and switched off the headlights of the car.

'So, what is it, gorgeous?' I asked.

'Ronnie, I want to let you know how I've felt for the last few days.'

My heart was beating faster and I knew what she wanted to tell me but my brain forbade me to hurry her.

'I think I am in love with you, Ronnie. I can see you both as a good friend and lover. I really love to spend time with you. I want you to be a part of my life,' she said everything at once.

Instead of trying to understand her feelings, my brain started to process what Mickey had told me about striking at the right moment. This was the time. I knew she would not stop me from doing anything.

'I love you too, Payal,' I said.

I was staring at her cleavage while saying this and noticed that a strap was hanging down her shoulder. Her ample bosom was very visible. She held my hand as I kept it on her thigh. She was wearing a short skirt so I could feel the softness of her thigh.

She couldn't resist and came close to me. I could smell the fragrance that I used to admired so much up close. Her eyes were shut and I put my lips on hers. We didn't kiss hard. Our dry lips were touching each other and rubbing against each other. Then I started to move my tongue inside her mouth.

We were smooching hard now. My right hand couldn't resist any longer. I just remembered the quote on her top, 'Hold me', and put my hand on her breast. She gave a deep sigh and hugged me tight. I removed her top gently and saw that she was wearing a red bra. Soon she was topless.

I pushed her seat into a reclining position. I stared at her boobs as I had wanted to since the day we had first met. She was so fair and they looked so gorgeous.

Soon, I removed her clothes and she helped me undress.

'Have you got any protection, love?' she asked me.

I had never thought about that but remembered something that Mickey had given me before I left. I checked my trouser pocket to see two condoms waiting to be used. I thanked Mickey mentally and put it on. Soon I was on top of her and making love to her.

She was breathing heavily as she asked me to push deep inside. She was scratching my back with her nails. We climaxed together. She put her head on my chest and kissed me. It was an incredible feeling. I finally understood why the world is so crazy about sex.

'Were you a virgin?' I knew this was a stupid question to ask but it came out before I could stop it. She kept quiet for a while and then replied that she was not. I told her that I had no problem with it and that we would keep this secret to ourselves and that she should not worry at all.

We wore our clothes. She seemed to be no longer the worse for vodka. She dropped me to the hostel. We kissed each other goodbye.

I went straight to Mickey's room and pushed the door open. Mickey was already there. The flowers and the crown proudly sat on the shelf. He hugged me as soon as he saw me.

'So how was everything, Mr Personality?' he teased. I smiled back and said, 'Thanks brother, for your help. I am no longer a virgin.'

We hooted and downed more vodka. We toasted for what was one of the best days of my life. I narrated the episode with Payal in detail and then we got to opening the prizes we received. I had got a photo frame and he had received a timepiece.

We emptied the vodka bottle and soon both of us were fast asleep. Before I fell asleep I thought about the day's happenings. I could still sense Payal's scent on my body. It was a long and unforgettable day.

Love and friendship were playing their role in my life and I was happy, undeniably happy.

The Academic Hurdle

The exams at the end of the first year played spoilsport to all the fun we were having. There was only one month left and I was not prepared at all. I had broken all the promises that I had made to myself before coming to college.

Mickey was a cool customer in every way. He was not at all worried about the exams. I spent some time in the college library but I really didn't understand how boys were able to study there especially when the exams were on. The library was full of girls as they were more serious about studies than the boys. As a result, instead of concentrating on my books, I would end up admiring the various beauties of the college.

The library was also a good place for couples who wanted to date free of cost or study together. There were four floors in the library. The reading halls were on the first three floors and the fourth floor was used as a storeroom. Most of the couples would study on the third floor. There was some mutual understanding between these couples so they did not object to anyone talking louder than was normally allowed. Attendants were mostly absent on the fourth floor and these couples used the rooms here very well indeed. The old books lying in the storeroom would bear witness to many lovers' escapades.

Monica was also a regular visitor to the library. I would admire her for hours on end, sometimes sitting on a bench behind her. Though I think she noticed this, she never acknowledged it. Payal did not like to study in the library. However, I was getting more and more worried about the exams as the days passed. Mickey, on the other hand, would spend his evenings at the gymnasium.

Payal and I would go for long walks in the evenings. The university campus was the perfect place for lovebirds. We would often kiss under the trees once it got dark but I never got another chance as on the night of the freshers' party. Payal was neither upset nor too happy about that night. Sometimes I wondered if she had another boyfriend, maybe someone outside the university, but it did not matter to me so I did not worry myself.

It was not just lust but some other selfish reason also as to why I wanted to be with Payal. She completed all my practical files and notes. While everyone else was busy completing these, I would study something else. Mickey would get his practical files completed by someone outside the university, after paying him for the work.

Soon the schedule for the exams was out and we hardly had two days off between each exam. The ambience in the hostel changed drastically. Loud music was no longer heard and everyone would study in their rooms. Maggi noodles would be a hot favourite at night and Mickey, being a great cook, would stay up late to make Maggi for us, though he spent the least amount of time hitting the books. You could

always find some porn magazines in his room. We would also go outside the university gates late at night in order to have parathas and tea. Those moments were really cherished.

Sid was much better at studies compared to Mickey and me. I found engineering drawing (ED) the most difficult subject during the first year. We had to make some figures, based on the step-by-step directions given in technical language. Sid was quite good at this subject.

The first exam was ED. There was only one day left and though my practical sheets had been completed by Payal, I was completely lost when it came to the theory part. Mickey and I wanted to sit with Sid to improve our preparation. Sid tried to explain the basics to both of us, and when we were quite clear conceptually, Sid asked us to solve a question. All of us started working on this individually.

'Hey, I am done with it.' I was the first one to solve it. Mickey said he had solved it too, and when we compared our solutions, they were exactly the same and we admired each other. But this glory didn't last long when Sid showed us his figures, which were very different from ours. We laughed loudly at our stupidity and I gave it another shot but finally all of us went off to sleep.

The ED exam was horrible. I spent more time looking at the other students than trying to solve the questions. Mickey left the exam room after one hour. He handed over the sheet to the teacher and winked at me with a naughty smile pasted across his face. I tried to cheat from my classmates till the exam got over.

The very first exam of my degree year was a complete disaster. I was very upset and sitting alone in my room at night. Sid was in some other room studying for the next exam. Suddenly Mickey came in.

'What happened, champ?' he asked.

'I am a good-for-nothing yaar. I can't even keep promises I make to myself,' I replied. My eyes were wet.

'C'mon. Be a man buddy. This is just a degree exam. It is not the end of your life. Other people can't even think of doing what you can. Half the hostel is crazy over Payal and it means so much to them if she just so much as stops to have a word. But she doesn't. You on the other hand have had her in your bed—I mean, in her own car. Rest easy, these exams will not make much difference. We just need to pass our degree year. No one will look at your marks during placement. Just concentrate on your general knowledge and conversation skills, Mr Personality!' The small lecture from Mickey calmed me down. I was feeling much better and very relaxed. We went to the sports room and played table tennis.

The next exam was mathematics and it was my favourite subject. I really worked hard and even made Mickey solve some questions. I could easily play with the various formulae in the subject. In the exam hall, I went through the whole question paper and relaxed a bit, secure in the knowledge that I could solve it. When there was just half an hour left to complete the exam I looked at Mickey. For the first time I saw him a bit worried. He was looking at me. I still had my own paper to complete and I knew all the answers. While my head told me to concentrate on the exam, my heart instructed me to help Mickey.

I preferred to listen to my heart. I hurriedly filled the rear portion of my question paper with some answers that would bring in high marks. When there were only fifteen minutes left for the exam to finish, I handed over my answer sheet to the teacher. On my way out, I dropped my question paper on Mickey's desk and this time it was my turn to wink at him.

Mickey hurriedly copied the answers and came out of the examination hall smiling. I was waiting outside. He came straight to me and hugged me tight. I felt very happy.

There were three holidays before the next exam. While the rest of the students, worried by the huge syllabus, started to study from the first night itself, Mickey and I preferred to spend time drinking to celebrate the two exams that were over.

'How will we pass this exam, hero?' I asked Mickey the next morning. There was a vast theory syllabus to cram. But Mickey had some other idea. He asked me to make some notes on the important topics that had a greater chance of coming in the exams. Then we got these notes photocopied.

'We can't use slips in the exam!' I was really worried.

'Nothing is going to happen. Trust me. I will teach you the trick of using slips in an exam hall. These boring theory exams will add nothing to our knowledge. We need to pass them this way only,' Mickey assured me.

The night before the exam, as I went to my room to sleep, I saw Sid sitting, his eyes wet. I had not had much contact with him during the exams as he would study with some academically serious guys. When I asked him the reason for his crying, he told me that his brother had met with an accident and was in the hospital for the last two days. He was out of danger now but Sid had not had any time to prepare for the exams. It was not possible for anyone to prepare over one night. I felt bad for him so decided to share the slips we had prepared for the exam.

He was shocked when he heard our bold idea but he had no other option. So we went to the exam hall, our socks and pockets fully loaded with the slips. Mickey taught us how to make a topic-wise master slip that would tell us the location of each slip.

Had Mickey used his brains to study, he would easily have topped the class.

The exam started. There were five big questions and I knew I had slips for all five. My heart was beating fast and my lips were dry. I took out the master slip to check the location for the first slip bearing the answer. It was in my right sock. I looked at the teacher. He was busy reading the question paper himself. I dropped my pen on the ground, and while picking it up, I took the slip out of my sock. It was easy to copy the answer thereafter. My confidence level also grew with the completion of each question. Mickey and I decided to go out of the hall after we completed three questions. These were enough to clear the exam. It was not safe to stay in the hall for a long time.

Sid didn't come out so quickly. His lust for high marks forced him to complete all the questions. While Mickey and I stood outside signalling to him to finish fast, he seemed busy copying the answers so much so that he did not notice the teacher coming his way.

The teacher caught him red-handed and, what was worse, he was found with the master slip, which revealed the locations of all the other slips on his body. Sid was so embarrassed that he refused to look at anyone. I looked fearfully at Mickey. He was sweating but tried to be calm. He asked me to come outside the college.

'Just cram all the three questions you wrote in the exam.' He ordered and took out the slips and started reading them. I was stunned by this response as it was totally unexpected.

'Why the hell should we do that now?'

'Sid might say that we were also involved in the cheating. The best justification we can give at that time is by making the authorities understand that we knew the answers. We will deal with Sid later. Just cram those three answers in the next half an hour.' Mickey's foresight was exceptional. After some time, an attendant came out looking for us. We were asked to go to the dean's office. The dean had made Sid

confess to our roles in the scheme. The attendant was ordered to check the slips inside our clothes. But all he could find were the blank question papers.

Mickey started explaining. 'We are not involved in this cheating scheme. I just solved three questions in the exam hall. I could solve them now again. If I had been cheating, then, would I not have been able to complete the entire paper?' I added my two bits to that statement.

The dean thought it was a good idea to check our involvement in the case. We were both given fresh answer sheets and we solved the three questions for which we had memorized the answers. The teacher checked them and nodded at the dean to tell him that we were right. Sid was astounded.

When Sid came back to the hostel late at night, Mickey and I were waiting for him. The other students were very anxious to know what had happened to him. We asked them to come in the morning as Sid was very tired. Sid was mad at us but when we explained the whole thing to him, he calmed down. He even apologized for giving our names to the dean.

The authorities put up a notice on the bulletin board to the effect that Sid was scrapped i.e. he was held back in the same class, given what he had done. Everyone was stunned at the stern action. I told Sid not to worry and that I would do something. I had not thought about this before but suddenly an idea formed itself.

I brought a paper, wrote something on it and pasted it on the bulletin board.

'General Body Meeting (GBM) at 10.00 p.m. in the mess. It is mandatory for every hostel inmate to attend.'

The clock struck ten at night and there was a huge gathering in the mess. I came in front of the group and asked everyone to listen to me. Mickey was standing next to me.

'Friends, I would like to thank you all for attending the GBM. This shows that we are united and will not let the authorities play with our careers. All of you know that our friend Sid got caught while cheating in the exam today. Well, we are human and are bound to make mistakes. There is no doubt that Sid has made a mistake and the worst thing is that he got caught while making it. The authorities have ordered that his semester be scrapped as punishment.

'This is highly unacceptable and a non-justifiable decision by the authorities. We hostellers are living away from our parents and have to look after each other like brothers. We have to take care of each other. Would you have accepted this had such injustice been done to your younger brother? C'mon answer me!' I got goosebumps as I shouted at the top of my voice.

'No ... No ... No,' could be heard from various corners.

'Then let's get together and raise our voices against this injustice! Let's stand together for a mass strike starting tomorrow morning. We will not take the rest of our exams till they accept our demands. They can scrap this course for Sid but we will not allow them to scrap the whole semester for our pal. Give your consent if this is acceptable to all of you.'

'Yes.' This time the entire gathering voiced their opinion. I never thought my words had so much weight.

The next day, everyone was on strike outside the college. The mats to sit on were arranged by the University Gurduwara and there were two groups of girls and boys respectively. The day scholars didn't have a say. They just followed our orders.

I was the new student leader and Mickey was the general secretary. There was one senior from each batch in the student committee formed to meet the authorities. Payal and a senior girl also joined us as representatives of the girls. We had a seven-member team to talk to the authorities.

I do not know what the strike represented to the others, but for me it was a good time to get to know the students around me better by interacting with them. The boys would not let go of a chance to flirt with the girls, and even during the strike, most would show up in their best apparel. This was bizarre but true.

I addressed the gathering again. Some of the students in the crowd seemed uncomfortable with the reason for the strike, but kept quiet because they lacked the courage to oppose us. We saw the dean coming in from the main gate of the college. He watched us as we sat on the mats, on strike. The lecturers and the faculty went into a tizzy because of the strike. After an hour or so, we were asked to enter the dean's office. He asked us to call off the strike but we were adamant in our refusal to do so.

The strike continued for the rest of the day. I addressed the crowd again in the evening and asked the students to assemble at the same venue the next morning. We had another GBM at night. I wanted to keep our hopes alive. I was not sure if we would be successful but I was listening to my heart.

The voice within had never ditched me.

When no good news came from the authorities till the afternoon, Mickey suggested that we take the strike one step further.

'If the authorities are not listening to us, then we have other ways to make them listen. We are taking out a rally to the Vice Chancellor's office. I want everyone to join the rally. The girls have made some posters and I want all the tall boys among us to hold them up high. Everyone should know about the injustice done to us. We have also called some reporters from the local newspaper but I don't want everyone to give their comments to them. Our spokesperson, Mr Mukul, will do this job,' I announced.

So we were on our way to the rally. This was not a small thing and the authorities definitely got both annoyed and worried. Mickey gave a filtered version of the story from our point of view to the media.

The next day's newspaper had my photograph and a piece about the scenario as narrated by Mickey. Sid was scared that his parents would read the newspaper and this would add to their troubles, worried as they were about his brother's accident. But it was a local newspaper and we asked him not to worry. The trick worked and the dean agreed to our demand the next morning. Sid was scrapped for the course and not the semester, and could take the rest of his exams.

There was hooting and shouting of joy all over the place. Mickey and Sid picked me up on their shoulders. I felt as though we had won a war. I felt no less than some superhero. This had never been done before and that too by a first-year student. My seniors congratulated me. We celebrated our success in the hostel at night.

Sid was very grateful. There were two more exams left and we decided to study and clear them as we were already on the authorities' radar and did not want to give them a chance to catch us again.

The exams were soon over and there was a long break after. A lot of things had happened during my first year and I felt that my personality had changed quite a bit during this time. The result of the exams were to come by the beginning of the next month.

On my way back home, I thought about the whole year and smiled to myself. There were lots of new faces in my memory now—Mickey, Sid, Payal and yes, Monica too. There was a kind of unknown



Turning Businessmen with Win Asia

I found that things at home were not as difficult as before when I came back for the vacations. Mom cooked my favourite dishes and Dad tried to be friendly with me. I was treated as an adult member of the family. I could use Dad's car whenever I wanted to instead of the rickety, old scooter. I had some good memories of that old scooter, too. I still remembered how Sonal used to say that she liked my scooter because it was in such a pathetic state that other girls would not look at me and it gave her a sense of security. Girls often have their own weird way of reasoning which can be tough for us boys to understand.

I spent a lot of time with my old friends of the MASTI group in the evening. All three of them had joined the arts stream in a local college after failing miserably in the engineering entrance exams. Rest of the time I would be reading novels, watching movies and surfing the Internet. I missed Mickey and Payal during this time. Payal also went to her home in Ludhiana during the holidays. I talked to her once a day on an average but usually she was the one who called.

One day, when she was feeling low, we decided to talk late into the night as someone was always around during the daytime and we were not able to share much. I hid the intercom under my pillow in the evening and turned off the ringer for the main phone in Dad's room.

Payal called me up at 11.30 p.m. I was waiting for her call and I picked up halfway through the first ring.

'Hi love, how are you?' she was whispering.

I ensured that my room was locked. 'Hi. I am good. What about you dear?'

'I am fine too but I miss you a lot. After going away from you, I realized how important you are to me. I love you baby ... I love you a lot.' She was speaking in romantic whispers. There was silence in the house and I could hear her breathing. Instead of reciprocating her emotions, I imagined her in her night suit and my manhood became hard. After all, it had been quite some time since I had made love to her.

'I love you too, baby. Where are you right now? Are you in your room? Are you sure that no one can hear you sweetheart?'

'Everyone is asleep, dear. The door of my room is also locked and there is no intercom to this number. Don't worry baby!' she assured me.

'Ok. What does my baby wear at night?' My car was getting on the track. I was gradually getting to the topic I wanted to discuss with her.

'What are you up to baby? I am wearing my night suit, a blue top with spaghetti straps and pink shorts.'

'What else are you wearing?'

'Ok. So my baby is getting naughty ... Hmmm ... Well I don't imprison my innocent boobs at night and you don't need to know the rest.' Her voice was trembling a bit. It seemed like she was getting excited too.

'Well, they are not innocent anyhow. They make me crazy every now and then but I love them a lot. Please remove your t-shirt, na.'

'Baby, what do you want to do? Are you serious? Should I remove it?'

'Yes, love. Please remove it and remove all your clothes. I want to imagine you nude. I am removing my clothes here.'

'Ok baby, I have removed everything. Please come into my bed, na,' she whispered. I was pleased with the way the equations had changed within ten minutes of the call. She was excited by now and trying to lead the conversation.

I was imagining her nude. She was making moaning sounds on the other side. My hand was hard at work. I came soon. I cleaned up the mess and rejoined her on the phone. I was feeling sleepy now. Her mood was also very cheerful.

'I love you dear. I feel as if I should come to your house and pick you up right now.' I continued with the romantic talk because it didn't seem nice to end the conversation all of a sudden. I did not want Payal to feel that she had just been used.

'Aha! Just try to pick me up then. You will be behind bars, dude. My dad is the DSP here,' she giggled.

'Don't challenge me. I can pick you up right in front of your dad's eyes, baby.' I knew she was kidding and her dad was an industrialist.

Before she could reply, there was a knock on the door. It was Dad. I disconnected the call immediately. But I was naked so I started searching for my clothes. I switched on the lights and wore my clothes as soon as possible and opened the door.

'What were you doing?' Dad asked me directly.

'Nothing, Dad. I was just trying to sleep.' I knew I had been caught red-handed and my brain was not helping me at all. It was such an embarrassing situation.

'All I want to say is that you should concentrate on your studies. No one in our family has ever been to the police station before. Please stay away from policemen's families. I am not going to say anything to your mom and Neetu. Go to sleep now.' He picked up the intercom and left my room.

I don't know when Dad picked up the main line and overheard my conversation with Payal. I was not even sure whether he had heard my naughty talk with her. But one thing was certain—he really believed Payal was a DSP's daughter and he was really worried about me. He would definitely not believe me if I told him that she was kidding. I was cursing myself for getting caught like this. I felt both embarrassed and guilty at the same time. My feelings were in such turmoil that I was unable to sleep.

I switched off the light and went to bed. The phone-sex had been really amazing given I had never experienced it before. But seeing how it ended, I would rather not go through it again.

The month passed soon and I was to rejoin college in two days. A surprise awaited me before I went back. Dad gifted me a laptop. I was on cloud nine. I hugged him tightly and started to explore the configurations of my laptop. On my way back to college I was very excited about meeting my friends again and flaunting the brand new laptop.

Dad, who had come to drop me, left for Patiala after having a cup of tea and giving me a small lecture to stay away from policemen's families. Again, I was too embarrassed to clarify anything. I chose to remain quiet.

By the time I got back to my room, Sid was already exploring my laptop. He was happy to see a computer in our room. We greeted each other with a warm hug. I was waiting for Mickey and he joined us in the evening. We hugged each other tightly as if we were meeting after many years. He congratulated me on getting the computer and also assured me that he would bring some good software to increase its utility.

It felt nice to attend college the next day. We had to complete our registration formalities for the second year. There were some new faces around—the freshers! We were the seniors now and it felt good to be in a position of power. Monica looked as pretty as ever. Our eyes glanced at each other for some seconds and then she walked past me. I had failed to come too close to her after that freshers' night.

Payal and I were not known as a couple as we usually met late in the evenings. She winked at me but I could not take my eyes off her cleavage.

The results were also out and thankfully, I had passed in all my papers. I heaved a sigh of great relief but Mickey had to take a supplementary exam in one course. He seemed to be happier than me as he was expecting the same results in other courses too and was not able to believe that he had passed the rest. Monica was amongst the toppers and Payal had also cleared all her courses with average marks.

The freshers' ragging was slower than what it had been last year. When other batchmates from the hostel asked Mickey or me to conduct the ragging, we decided to give it a try.

It was Sid's birthday party that day. We were drinking in our room in the hostel when a first-year student came in to get his ass print attested. So their batch was also going through the same joke. Sid asked the guy to show him his ID card. He took out the sanitary napkin from his underwear and showed it to us. It had his picture and name—Sukhi.

We asked Sukhi to sit and have a drink with us as it was Sid's birthday. He innocently refused as he was forbidden from drinking. Mickey asked him to introduce himself. By now Sukhi was so well-trained that he completed the activity in two minutes without a single mistake. Now this hurt everyone's ego and they tried some more ragging tricks on him.

We looked at each other as Sukhi stood in the centre of the room. I winked at Mickey and asked Sukhi to slap him. No one had seen this trick before so there was silence in the room. Sukhi tried to refuse but when I shouted in anger, he slowly slapped Mickey. Mickey stayed numb for a moment and then fell to the ground with a thud.

Mickey started to tremble and Sukhi got frightened by this. I asked him to give Mickey some water but Mickey spat it back at Sukhi's face. Everyone started to worry but I was sure of Mickey's acting skills.

Sukhi began to cry. Everyone asked me to call the doctor as Mickey seemed to get worse by the minute. I yelled at Sukhi who helplessly started rubbing Mickey's chest. Sukhi was crying and apologizing again and again. I asked Sukhi to rub Mickey's feet but that also didn't help and Mickey kept on shivering.

'The only way out is to transfer your body's warmth to Mickey's. I have called the doctor but till he arrives, you have to warm him so that he stops shivering,' I said to Sukhi.

Sukhi looked helpless at that moment. He just wanted to save Mickey's life. He removed his t-shirt and pants and started to hug Mickey. It was such a funny situation that Mickey could not hold back anymore and burst out laughing. Sukhi sat on the floor, red with embarrassment. But even he could not stop smiling as the trick dawned on him.

We stopped torturing him and made him have dinner with us. He felt relaxed after spending some time with us. I asked him to come to our room if he wanted to escape the ragging or if he needed help.

Things were fine till the day Mickey asked me to earn some money—something extra to give a boost to our pocket money. Mickey always had many entrepreneurial ideas. His brain was always busy thinking up shortcuts to earn money.

'Ronnie yaar ... Let's start earning something. As students we will have a lot of time to spend on the business we set up. Once we start working, there will be no time. The only problem now is getting some capital to start with. We could both find out a way out to arrange it,' Mickey said after having his fourth peg of whisky. The lights in the room were dim and Jagjit Singh's ghazals were playing in the background on my laptop. They were serving chicken in the mess for dinner and we had ordered some up to the room.

'Mickey, even I want to earn money and make my parents feel proud of me. But there is no field of business to which we can devote the late hours of the night while attending college during the day,' I responded.

'I have an idea but I cannot work on it alone. We can get into a partnership. You know something? We have one asset with us. This can be useful to earn money. We can set the timings for work too. That asset is your computer, man.'

'Hmm ... The idea seems interesting but let me understand the scheme first. Don't we have to invest any capital in that case?'

'There are many online companies that will pay us handsome amounts and in return would expect us to spend just a little time on the Internet and complete assignments online. You don't need any special training to complete those assignments. We just have to register with some online agency and they will provide us the assignments and will pay us on a monthly basis. I have already done the homework on this and there is a company named Win Asia which is quite famous and reliable. This seems to be a very easy way to earn money. There are no exams scheduled for now so time is also not an issue.' Mickey explained the whole idea in one breath. There was a sparkle in his eyes and he gulped his fifth peg swiftly.

His ideas were interesting but I took some time to weigh the pros and cons of the whole thing. Mickey was expecting a positive reply from me. My head seemed unsure but my heart did not want to hurt Mickey.

'Cheers! For Win Asia buddy! We will make it,' Mickey announced with a broad smile.

Soon we were down to our sixth peg of whisky and our quota for the day was over. Mickey changed the music to his favourite number, *Hum honge kaamyaab*.

Win Asia had an office in the market close to the university. We approached them the next evening and figured out the formalities that we had to complete to become members. Capital was a major issue. They wanted us to deposit twenty thousand rupees to become their registered members. They convinced us that if we worked for three hours on an average daily, then we could easily earn five thousand rupees per month. But the money was a big issue for students like us.

However, Mickey had a solution for this problem too. He got hold of the name and address of a financier through a friend. Mickey's friend Tanmay knew this financier very well and the man was ready to invest in us provided Tanmay became our guarantor. We went to meet him at his office. His name was Shaukat Ali and he was well known by the name of Ali Bhai.

Ali Bhai was a dangerous-looking man. He was huge, more than six feet tall and with a big moustache. He was bald and there were one or two cuts on his face. He was wearing a white kurtapyjama and looked more like a bouncer in a pub. I was a little worried looking at him. I began to wonder if we were doing the right thing by borrowing from him. But the fear was soon over when Ali Bhai opened his mouth to speak to us. He had the voice of a ten-year-old child and it seemed funny coming from a man of his size. It was difficult not to laugh out loud. Mickey kicked me under the table and I controlled myself.

Ali Bhai explained all the formalities to us and put forward two bundles of ten thousand rupees on the table. In total, we had to return twenty-five thousand rupees to him in two years' time. We signed the papers and Mickey collected the money from the table. It didn't seem right to count the money in front of him. Tanmay signed as a guarantor for us.

We submitted the money at the Win Asia office and then attended the day-long training programme to understand the assignments. It took us three more days to get the Internet connection working on my computer. Now we were ready to start making money. But then, little did we know ...

We hadn't mentioned our business plan to anyone except Sid, who was least interested and never bothered us. Mickey assured me that he would complete all the assignments as this had been his brainwave and that I should not worry about them. We shifted the laptop to his room. Mickey started working very hard initially and would even stay up late at night making it very difficult for him to attend college during the day. I thought if Mickey spent as much time studying he could surely clear his supplementary paper as well without having to repeat the course with the juniors the coming year.

And then we got our first salary. It was a cheque of four thousand three hundred rupees in both our names. We had already opened a joint account in the bank and we encashed the cheque. The money seemed to be less than our expectations considering the amount of time we had spent. Nevertheless, it was quite an achievement. Mickey took two thousand rupees to give to Ali Bhai. We divided the balance between ourselves. We celebrated at night with the remaining three hundred rupees. Everything seemed to be easy now. If we went on like this, we could return Ali Bhai's money within a year and spend the rest of our earnings on ourselves.

The first thing I did with my share was to take out a hundred rupees and give it to the Food Hall Trust of the University Gurudwara. The next thing was to send a bunch of red roses to Monica at her hostel address. Of course I didn't write my name on the card nor did I mention it to Mickey. Then I took Payal out to dinner, something she had wanted to do for a long time. I was still left with enough money and I bought a small cassette player for myself now that the laptop had moved to Mickey's room.

Mickey's interest in the assignment faded in the coming months. The amounts on the cheques also reduced accordingly. However we managed to pay off Ali Bhai's monthly instalments on time. After four or five months we stopped working on the assignments.

'Yaar Ronnie ... The assignments are too boring. We are ruining our student life by working on these tedious assignments. We have learnt a lot of things while working for Win Asia, but now it is not possible to carry on.'

'You are right, Mickey, but what about the money we borrowed from Ali Bhai? He is going to demand his money at any cost.'

'We need not worry about that. We have already paid him ten thousand bucks and only fifteen thousands are left to repay. He doesn't know our addresses. Tanmay, the only common link between us, has already moved to Australia. So it will not be possible for him to trace us. We will give his money back when we can arrange it from some other source,' Mickey announced confidently.

The idea didn't seem okay to me but I went along with it because even I didn't want to work on those boring assignments any longer. So instead of making us rich, the Win Asia scheme had left us with an additional debt of fifteen thousand rupees! We soon forgot that we had started a business and my laptop was back to entertaining us with music, games and porn movies. I was making the best use of the computer, which had been gifted to aid me in my studies.

Meanwhile, I was getting bored of Payal. She didn't seem to interest me anymore. We had made love at every possible location including the fourth floor of the library, the changing room in the hockey stadium, the cyber café and cinema halls. I was not able to come close to Monica though she remained at the very top of the list of my crushes in college.

Sachin Tendulkar, Sixers and Sex!

Hostel life is so unpredictable that one cannot be prepared for anything. There are no pre-determined rules to survive hostel life. Each day brings a new lesson with it.

Another peculiarity of hostel life is that people enjoy their ability to sing. One can always make use of the hostel corridors and bathrooms to test the range and pitch of one's voice. When one walks down the corridor, one can hear a different song being played in each room. It is human nature to hum the last-heard song. So given the fact that I take five minutes to reach my room, I would end up singing at least ten different numbers from Bryan Adams to Ghulam Ali.

I was so lost in friends, girls and all the monkey business I was resorting to that I had completely forgotten my real aim—education. I wanted to make my parents proud by proving myself to the world. This was definitely not possible if I was going to spend time running after girls.

My next lover would not have made it into my life had it not been for our cricket guru, Sachin Tendulkar. The cricket series between India and Australia had commenced and cricket fever was raging across the hostel. Everybody would congregate in the television room, which would get so crowded that moving your feet without stepping on someone else's toes would be difficult, especially when Sachin was batting. Sachin was a favourite and an icon for young people like us. The sadness when he got out equalled the feeling I had when I broke up with my girlfriend.

Sukhi was also from Mickey's hometown, Amritsar, and he would visit us often. He seemed to be an interesting guy. The ragging for his batch was also over. Sukhi was not very close to his batchmates as he spent most of his free time with us. He was an intelligent guy and impressed us with his general knowledge and active participation in various elocution competitions.

Sukhi gave me and Mickey different nicknames. He used to call Mickey Money Guru and me Love Guru and would always ask us for help if he wanted to attract the attention of a certain girl in his batch. He also admired Mickey's schemes to earn more and more money.

'Hey man, happy birthday and many, many happy returns of the day!' It was Mickey's birthday and even he could not escape the birthday rituals at the hostel. Well, a guy had to put up with so many kicks and punches on the bum for his own and his girlfriend's birthdays. The entire batch would get together at midnight and then birthday bumps would be followed by hits using pillows, slippers, books, hockey sticks and cricket bats. This seemed a very cruel way of celebrating a birthday but it was fun. When it came to boys who would not mix with the rest of the crowd, birthdays provided the perfect opportunity to beat them up.

A surprise awaited us the next morning. Mickey's dad had sent a big gift for his son. It was a motorbike! We were on cloud nine. I knew that there was no difference between us anymore and that the bike belonged as much to me as it did to Mickey.

It was no fun staying in the hostel in the evenings once the bike came. We would explore various corners of the city and spend our evenings ogling at the girls in the city. I knew when Monica visited the library in the evenings, so every day I would cross her on the bike trying to pretend that it was sheer coincidence. Even she would look at me knowingly.

However, Payal was slowly drifting away from me with each passing day. We did not fight, but at the back of our minds, we knew that the spark was no longer there in the relationship. As a result there was no physical pleasure to gain from her. And I was growing frustrated at the absence of someone special in my life.

It was Monday morning and I was attending the first lecture. Mickey came late to the classroom having just returned from home that morning. He looked charming as he winked at me on entering the class. He wanted to share something desperately with me but the seats beside me were already occupied. He waited for the lecture to get over and then hurried over to me.

'Hey Ronnie ... Lets bunk the next lecture pal. I've something very interesting to share with you. You will simply go crazy.'

Mickey's excitement was so contagious.

We moved towards the college canteen. We took two chairs from the canteen to under the old banyan tree as two cups of coffee and sandwiches arrived.

'Now tell me what the hell happened? Why are you so excited buddy?'

'I met a girl on my way home on Friday. Her name is Sasha and she is damn pretty and sexy as well,' Mickey uttered in one breath.

'Ohh ... That sounds great. Tell me the whole thing, yaar. How did all this happen? How did you start? What are the future prospects?' I asked a row of questions while sipping coffee.

'Well, she was sitting next to me. For the first half an hour I kept on trying to get my guts together to say something but taking the initiative was very difficult. I was still planning my speech when she asked me for some water by pointing to the water bottle in my hand. I handed over the bottle to her as if I was born to do that. She thanked me and smiled at me.'

'Mickey, yaar, you are such a dumbo. She was giving you a direct chance and you did not take it.'

'I guessed the same thing from her smile and asked her if she was a student or working somewhere. She replied that she was a student in a polytechnic college, currently in second year and living in the hostel. Then she introduced herself and said she came from Amritsar. I also introduced myself and we started to share more stuff.'

'Hey ... Don't tell me you told her your real identity. It is against your set of rules, man.'

'No, of course, not. I introduced myself as Sumer, final-year degree student. She was irritated about the strict rules of her hostel. She didn't know many people in the city outside college and it seemed she was desperate to be my friend. I guess, there is a chance for you too, maybe, with a friend of hers.'

'That's awesome man. So when are you both meeting up again?'

'Well, destiny has favoured me. She forgot her polythene packet in the bus. She had already given me her mobile number. So I called her after reaching home and we are planning to meet this evening itself.

Just make a wild guess, what do you think she left in that polythene bag?'

'How would I know yaar? Maybe some clothes or books,' I said.

'No! She forgot her sanitary pads in that. She must have been very embarrassed but didn't show it and I did not speak of it. I have stapled the polythene too,' Mickey grinned mischievously.

'But today there is a day-and-night match between India and Australia. How can we miss that, yaar?'

'Just shut up, man. We can't miss the chance to meet Sasha. This is our highest priority today. Don't discuss it with anyone and arrange one more bike. Sasha and her friend will meet us outside the university as I have invited them for coffee.'

Everything sounded so interesting that I kept on imagining the girls while attending the rest of the lectures. Mickey drew a rough sketch of Sasha on the last page of his notebook and showed it to me proudly. Knowing Mickey as I did, I was not surprised to see that his sketch focussed on her body, not her face.

We got ready to meet the girls in the evening. The cricket match had started in the afternoon and India decided to field first. We skipped the chance to see Sachin batting as we were far more excited about meeting the girls.

The girls were waiting outside the university. Mickey introduced me as Vishal to Sasha and her friend Tina. Both the girls were gorgeous. Sasha was short and wore a black, figure-hugging salwar-kameez. She definitely had a nice figure. Her hair was bunched up in a short ponytail. She looked very sweet and homely.

Tina was her batchmate and hailed from Jalandhar. She was taller than Sasha and slimmer too. She was dressed in a western outfit—a stretched top and a loose pair of cargo pants. Her figure was not that attractive but her dusky complexion suited her features. There was a thick layer of kohl under her eyes that made her look very attractive. Both the girls were carrying luggage on their shoulders. They had come straight from their hometowns and had decided to meet us before going to their hostel. Mickey handed over the polythene to Sasha in a casual way so that she didn't feel awkward. After the formal introductions were over, we reached the cafeteria on our bikes. Mickey asked me to leave their bags at the hostel so that we could roam freely. The girls hesitated a bit but we convinced them.

I dropped off the bags in my room. Sid was sitting in the room studying, as he was least interested in the match, but seemed very curious about the bags. I tried to hide the truth from him and told him that they belonged to my cousin, who would perhaps stay with us for the night. Sid read my face and opened one of the bags in a flash. He picked up a bra from the bag and asked me if it belonged to my brother! I was speechless on being caught red-handed. I narrated the entire episode to him and he listened to me with mouth wide open. I told him to look after the bags and went back to Mickey and the girls.

They had finished the coffee and were planning a walk in the fields. The girls were big chatterboxes and didn't let us say much. Mickey asked Sasha to go for a walk with him alone as he wanted to discuss something with her. Sasha smiled a bit as if she was well aware of Mickey's thoughts. They followed a different path and this was my chance to get close to Tina.

We walked slowly and I started the conversation by asking her what Sasha thought about Mickey.

'Sasha likes him as a friend. We both were looking for good company outside our college. Sumer and Sasha seem to make a nice couple,' she told me.

'Okay, tell me something about yourself, Tina. It's my hobby to make new friends.'

'Well, I like to make new friends and if the friend is a handsome guy like you, then only a fool would skip the chance,' she began.

'I heard you were from Jalandhar? Did you have any previous relationships?' I asked.

'Yes, I have been brought up in Jalandhar. There were many boyfriends in my life but not a single one whom I could depend on in the long run.'

'Do you have an ongoing relationship or commitment?'

'I am in search of a new companion these days. Are you committed? Tell me something about your love life,' Tina asked.

From our conversation, two things were quite clear—she was not mature and she was directly hitting on me. I was quite surprised by her bold manner. She was getting straight to the point. She did not want to waste any time nor did I have to make much effort to impress her.

Still I responded, 'According to me, how we think and the friends we make are the only factors that determine whether we can enjoy ourselves or not. We may live in beautiful places but if we are far away from our friends, we will not be happy. I believe in living life to the fullest every moment. I have had many girlfriends in my life too and I do not feel guilty about it. I have never lied to any girl or used her. I guess lady luck is smiling on me, which is why girls get attracted to me.' I had devised my plan. She was a bit different from the other girls I had met thus far. Normally, girls would avoid talking frankly at the first meeting. They always wanted the guy to lay the foundation for the relationship. Tina, on the other hand, was very clear that she was searching for a new boyfriend.

We got quite close in the next half an hour on our way back to the cafeteria. Sasha and Mickey were already waiting for us. It was eight in the evening by then and quite dark in the university campus. Tina was already asking me to hurry up in order to escort her back to her hostel as her warden was quite strict. I had to bring their luggage from the hostel too.

But Mickey had some other plans. He had convinced Sasha to stay in the hostel for the night. The girls had been out with us for the first time so it seemed quite unbelievable that they would really agree to stay with us for the night. And how could we put them up at the hostel? What if someone saw them at night? I thought. This had never happened before. Everything seemed impossible and exciting at the same time. Mickey however, knew the answers to all my questions and just winked as usual. Tina was getting nervous because it was not a part of the plan for the evening.

Now it was my turn to handle the situation. I tried to convince her in a friendly tone. 'Hey Tina. C'mon, yaar. Let's try it out. Don't look at me as if it is my daily routine to take girls to the hostel. But I guess you wouldn't mind some adventure in your life. Right? Well let's make it happen today. Your warden doesn't know that you people are in the city. And both of you can sleep in my room and I will share Sumer's room. We will talk late into the night and believe me, it'll be fun.' I knew very well that I was quite good at convincing people. Tina was not able to refuse the proposal though she seemed worried.

Mickey had to stay with them till I made the arrangements in the hostel. Everything depended on me now. One thing was certain that the girls would have to stay in different rooms otherwise it would be impossible to fulfil our intentions. I had to plan out everything in the next half an hour because the girls could not stay at the cafeteria for too long. I went straight to Sid. He was studying in the room as usual. I updated him with the whole scenario.

'This is impossible, man. What are you talking about? Are you nuts or out of your mind, buddy? Have you even thought of the consequences if you get caught?' Sid was sweating and his lips were getting dry.

'Listen Sid, there is no other option right now. Just let me know if you are with us in the operation or not?'

Sid thought for a second and then agreed to side with us. He had the keys to a senior's room on the ground floor. The senior was away for his brother's wedding. Sid would study in his room when we watched movies on the computer in our room. This was a great help at that moment. It was very difficult to move the girls to our room as it was the last room on the top floor of the hostel. To reach our room they would have to walk through the whole hostel and it was quite impossible to bring a girl there. We had arranged one room and could bring the girl on the bike directly outside the room from behind the mess when all the mess boys were busy serving dinner.

We were not able to find another room though. Sid was getting nervous and he suggested bringing both the girls to the single room on the ground floor itself. I was still trying to steady my nerves and thinking about another option. Suddenly the noise of clapping and hooting distracted me. It was coming from the TV room. I smiled and asked Sid to follow me to the TV room, where the other hostellers sat, watching India bat and prepare to chase a massive target set by the Australian team. Sachin Tendulkar was at the crease and hitting the bowlers all over the field. There was whistling and hooting at every shot he hit outside the boundary.

I dragged Sid outside the TV room. 'Listen Sid, this is the time to act boldly and bring the girls inside. There is not a single guy in the hostel as everyone is in the TV room busy watching the match. They will not return till Sachin is out. Sachin is playing well and I have full confidence in him. Let's bring the girls!' Sid had no other option than to nod his assent.

Now the next hurdle was to convince the girls to stay in separate rooms. I had a plan for that too. We opened the senior's room and switched off the lights. I took a jacket with a hood from his room and asked Sid to join me on the bike. We went straight to the cafeteria where Mickey was waiting impatiently. The girls also seemed very nervous. Mickey was keeping them calm. I introduced Sid in a hurry to them (of course with a fake name). I told them that we had to take the girls one by one or else we would get caught. I asked Tina to wear the jacket I had brought with me and keep the hood on. I started the bike and asked her to sit behind me. Then I asked Sid to join us. We had to adjust sitting on the bike. But looking at us, no one would guess there was a girl in between. Moreover there was no one around at that late hour in the evening. Mickey asked us to return soon.

I was praying that Sachin stays at the crease. Everything was in his hands now. Sachin didn't fail me. I moved the bike slowly behind the mess and the TV room, from which hooting and whistling were still audible. We stopped the bike in front of the senior's room and got inside in a jiffy. There was no one in the corridors. I asked Tina and Sid to follow me towards the steps. My heart was beating fast and my fingers were crossed. Luck was also favouring us. But as we reached the second floor I heard someone singing in the corridor. We stopped.

There was a tubelight on the stairs and anyone could easily make out Tina between us. Sid asked me to run downstairs. For a moment I was at a loss. We could get caught at any moment and the news would spread. I knew inside me that I could make it somehow. I asked Sid to lift me up so that I could

tamper with the tubelight and turn it off. The main switch for all tubelights in the hostel was located in the attendant's room on the ground floor. We turned off the tubelight and proceeded. The voice came closer. It was Kaali. I asked Sid to take Tina to the room on the other side of the stairs and I moved towards Kaali.

I hugged Kaali tightly as I approached him. He looked stunned for a second and asked me what I was up to.

'Kaali bhai. I am giving you Jaadu ki Jhappi as I am sorry about what happened between us during ragging. I want us to forget that time and be friends. You must have seen *Munna Bhai*, *M.B.B.S.* and perhaps know that this Jaadu ki Jhappi thing really works. I am feeling so relaxed after hugging you, brother.'

Kaali smiled back at me and hugged me tightly. I guess no one had ever hugged him before and this was a very memorable moment. He was not used to such affectionate treatment. I looked at the other end of the corridor and saw Tina and Sid entering the room. I told Kaali to move to the TV room as Sachin had already hit a half century. This was a wild guess but I was convinced that Sachin was going to make a century that day. Kaali hurried towards the TV room and I went towards my room.

I knocked on the door and confirmed my identity to Sid. He opened the room and I saw Tina sitting on my bed smiling at me. She was definitely impressed with the way I had handled Kaali. She hugged me tightly as I entered the room.

'This is your Jaadu ki Jhappi, which you really deserve, sweetheart!' I asked her to wait in the room and bolted the door from within and switched off the lights. I forbade her to open the door if someone other than either of us knocked on the door. I asked her to explore the laptop till we got Sasha to the hostel.

Things were going our way but it was getting very late. This time, I left Sid outside the senior's room on the ground floor and hurried back to Mickey and Sasha. I picked them up and brought them to the hostel. We got Sasha inside the senior's room and asked her to wait there till we returned. We locked the room from outside. She was also given the same instructions as Tina.

We hurried towards the mess as dinner was about to get over. I explained the whole scene to Mickey on the way to the mess and he appreciated the way I had arranged everything. Everyone was in the TV room and the mess was empty. We had our dinner and took two extra plates with us. No one cared much about our activities as everyone was involved in watching cricket.

'Ronnie, I have four condoms with me. You take two and I will keep the other two. Now let us handle the girls on our own. Just remember one thing. We have to take them out at five in the morning. Best of luck, brother!' Mickey winked at me as usual and handed me a pair of condoms. Sid was a silent party to the discussion all this time.

Mickey took the food for Sasha and went to her room. Sid and I went to our room. I asked him to stay in Sukhi's room that night.

During that time my conscience was asking me whether I was doing the right thing. But lust had taken control of my brain and rendered it deaf to the voice of my conscience. I knocked on the door and confirmed my identity. Tina opened it. She was wearing her night suit that she had unpacked from her bag, which was already in the room. I gave her the food and she enquired about Sasha.

I convinced her that Sasha was downstairs and was not able to come upstairs as there were many guys in the corridor by then. She knew very well how we had managed to escape Kaali, so it was quite possible that Sasha was unable to come upstairs. We didn't switch on the lights and she finished dinner in the dim light from the laptop. A slow melody was playing in the background. I took over the laptop while she was busy eating her dinner. I checked the history section and I could not help smiling—I noticed that she had surfed several porn sites. I just played one of the videos and asked her if she enjoyed watching this stuff. She blushed embarrassedly and requested me to turn it off. She was speechless.

I went to the balcony to check the scene outside. The TV room was still full and noisy. Fog had also made visibility low and so I returned to the room and closed the door to the balcony behind me. Tina had finished dinner. I was rubbing my hands as if it was very cold in the room. I put my cold hands on her cheeks and she started to laugh and hit me playfully. In the meantime, I got into the bed and asked her to play a movie on the laptop. She opted to watch *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* and told me that it was her favourite movie.

Soon we were both lying sideways and she was in front of the laptop. I was behind her. She didn't even ask me to move to the other bed. Tina was trying to concentrate on the movie and I had other things in mind.

I was so close to her that I was sure she could feel my breath on her neck. I tried to move my feet onto hers but she was behaving as if she had not noticed. We were sharing the quilt and very soon my turgid manhood was pressing against her back. I could see her wetting her lips and as my feet ascended her legs she moved to face me and I put my arm around her waist. Her top left her tummy exposed and I ran my hand over it as she closed her eyes and pushed my hand away. She was breathing heavily as I removed my t shirt and lay alongside her under the quilt.

'Why are we doing this? We have met for the first time today and now we are sharing a bed. This is not right. Please don't do this to me, Vishal,' she spoke with her eyes closed. Things were getting out of control but I kept my cool.

Silence prevailed for five minutes broken only by the sound of the movie. She lost her control before I did and hugged me tightly and started kissing my chest and shoulders. Soon we were exploring each other's mouths. She removed her top and the red bra. I was astonished to see her boobs. Though they were much smaller in size they were firmer than Payal's.

Things were suddenly heating up but whenever I tried to pull off her pyjamas, she resisted. It was as though she was not ready to go the full distance. So I tried smoothening things. I began feeling her body above the waist and then, suddenly pushed my hand between her legs. All of this happened so quickly that she hardly had any time to react. She pressed her legs tightly but I was successful in parting them. She lost control subsequently and started to moan. We began to rub our bodies against each other and she played with my bulging manhood. I quickly took off our remaining clothes and put on a condom. Soon I was on top of her. After what was very passionate lovemaking we climaxed with her lying on top of me, breathing heavily.

I could hear crackers bursting outside on the lawn. The boys were whistling and shouting. These were the rituals peculiar to our celebration of India's win. And tonight it made me feel as if everyone was celebrating my success in bedding this girl. I was smiling in the dark at all the events that had taken

place since the morning. I could not believe what had just happened and I was hoping that Mickey had succeeded too. Suddenly someone knocked on our door. Tina got scared hearing the sound.

I assured her that it was Sid and he must have brought some fruit for us. She asked me if she should wear her clothes. 'Don't waste time putting on clothes. I will just take the fruit from him and close the door. He will not be able to see that you are nude under the quilt. It will take you time to put on the clothes and then Sid will doubt the situation.'

I hurriedly put on my clothes and opened the door and moved outside. Sid was carrying a plate with pieces of apples and oranges on it. I told him that I had accomplished my mission ...

He just said one sentence smilingly, 'Sachin hit a century and we have won the match.'

Cricket is an important part of Indian psychology. Men can't stop discussing it, no matter what the situation.

I started feeling guilty about what I just did but my excitement at my victory overwhelmed the guilt and I rushed to the ground floor to check on Mickey. I completely forgot that I had left Sid with the fruit tray outside my room.

I drank water on my way downstairs and knocked on his door. I knew I was disturbing him but I wanted the details. He opened the room and came outside wearing only a towel. His appearance was dishevelled.

'What is it man? Is everything all right?'

'I am done with her. It was great fun. She is quite hot.' I narrated the whole story in brief.

As soon as the words left my mouth we heard a scream from the balcony upstairs. We looked above in surprise and saw Tina standing there crying. She had worn her clothes and was threatening Sid that she would jump from the balcony if he came any closer. Sid was begging her to come inside the room.

After I left to meet Mickey Sid entered the room to offer Tina some fruit. Tina got scared when she saw Sid in the room and she didn't know how to react as she was nude under the quilt. This is where she got lucky. Sid could not make out that she was nude. He offered her some fruit and she asked him to go to the balcony for five minutes. It didn't take long for her to get dressed, and before Sid could speak up, she went to the balcony and started threatening him.

When I entered the room, I went up to her and slapped her across her face. I warned her of the consequences if she continued to scream and asked her to come inside the room. Then I sat her down and made her realize that there were about three hundred students in the hostel and if she didn't shut up, there would be three hundred guys beating down the door to lay their hands on her. She calmed down after hearing that. The next thing I did was to shove Sid out of the room. The situation was explained to Mickey too so that he could go back to enjoying the night with Sasha.

It would only be fair to expect that Sasha and Tina would not visit us anymore given what had happened that night. Sid apologized for having spoilt my night. But I gave him a tight hug and told him that I could sacrifice a hundred girls like Tina for a friend like him. Sid's eyes welled with tears and he returned my hug. Sid and I slept in the TV room.

Mickey dropped the girls outside the university in the morning. He woke us up after coming back. Soon enough, we were teasing each other about the events of the previous night. Suddenly the newspaper delivery man threw the paper into our room. It was probably the first time other than the days of the exams when I had woken up that early. The newspaper fell bang in front of my chair. The

front page had a big picture of Sachin Tendulkar with his bat pointing at me. He had hit a century yesterday contributing to India's win. I smiled at him because he had been instrumental in making my night successful too. And the three of us sat down to drink tea.

'Cheers to Sachin Tendulkar! May God bless you and may you keep making many more centuries.'

Mickey's Escapades

Sunday was the day when we cleaned our rooms. I would go home on alternate weekends and on the weekend that I stayed at the hostel, I would clean up the mess in my room. There would be a thick layer of dust everywhere and a number of insects, including spiders with long skinny legs and lizards, inhabited the neglected corners of my room, knowing well that they would be undisturbed till cleaning day.

Cricket and the movies were also as important, if not more, during the weekends. Friendly cricket matches between various batches were usually scheduled over these weekends and would be great fun. Weekends also meant some much needed alone time.

Mickey woke up late and came to my room to get his toothpaste and soap. It was eleven in the morning and Mickey returned looking fresh and considerably more awake. He asked me to accompany him to the hostel canteen for breakfast as the mess had closed by then.

While drinking his tea, Mickey told me he was planning to visit Sasha's house at Amritsar that night as her parents were out attending a wedding. I was surprised that Mickey had still fixed up a date with her despite what had happened the last time. I warned him and urged him to be more careful. Mickey seemed confident that all would be well. He asked me to drop him off at the bus stand. I got ready and armed with the bike keys went down only to see that a tyre was punctured. We looked at each other in dismay and since most of our batchmates had already left for their homes, we could not borrow a bike from someone at the hostel. Most of the mechanics' shops were also shut on Sundays. Mickey was getting late and seemed truly out of luck.

Suddenly, I saw a scooter approaching. It was Mr Malhotra, our hostel warden. Pasting a smile on my lips, I went up to him and requested to use his scooter so that I could drop Mickey off at the University gates.

'Well, you could have taken my scooter but I will be out for lunch at the Vice Chancellor's residence and am getting late now. So please excuse me,' said Mr Malhotra politely.

'It will hardly take five minutes sir. His sister is unwell and he has to reach home as early as possible. If the situation was not so serious, I would not have bothered you, sir. You are our guardian at the hostel in the absence of our parents.' I was just being myself. I couldn't help it.

Mr Malhotra's facial expressions changed and he looked at Mickey with pity. He thought for a second, then took out the keys and handed them to me. The bunch included at least half a dozen keys. I didn't bother to enquire about the rest as I could easily recognize the scooter's in the pile.

I kick-started his scooter before he could change his mind. Mickey jumped on the pillion seat and off we sped, shouting at the top of our lungs when we felt we had come a long way from Mr Malhotra. It was an old, rusty scooter, unable to pick up much speed and the brakes were rusty.

I opted for the shortcut to the bus stand. The only problem was that we had to go via a side road for at least a kilometre. Breaking rules was no big deal for us, but we noticed that some traffic cops were waiting ahead and as soon as they saw us they whistled and shouted for us to stop.

Mickey said, 'Oh shit' under his breath and I turned the scooter in the direction we had come from. But the scooter slipped and we both fell. By the time I picked up the scooter a policeman had caught up with us. He caught Mickey's collar by which time I had started the scooter again. Mickey was squirming in the policeman's grasp trying desperately to free himself. I was shouting to Mickey to come towards me. Some more policemen were running towards us and I was certain that we were in big trouble. Suddenly, Mickey punched the policeman holding onto him and when the cop's nose began to bleed, he loosened his grasp on Mickey. Mickey freed himself and jumped onto the scooter.

I accelerated and we entered a small lane in the adjacent colony. We seemed to be riding through these lanes without knowing where they led. Suddenly, we realized that a police jeep was following us and we were fleeing like criminals. My elbow was bleeding, Mickey's trouser was torn and the scooter was in bad shape. If nothing else, this alone could get us into trouble.

I realized soon enough that we had reached a dead end. Looking back I noticed the police jeep had not caught up with us so we looked around for help. Mickey spotted a temple nearby and we entered the temple compound. I parked the scooter against a wall and Mickey brought some mats and tarpaulin from the temple's storeroom to cover the scooter. We heard the police siren blaring loudly and looked at each other.

Mickey did not seem scared at all. He winked at me and set about wrapping a saffron chola, also brought from the storeroom, around his head and torso. It had 'Ram Ram' printed all over it. I did the same after removing my shoes, and followed him inside the temple.

I closed my eyes and started to pray. So scared was I that I promised myself I would pray for the next forty days if we got out of this unscathed.

I really can't understand why we always tend to remember god during difficult times. Do we bribe god through our prayers? And does He really ward off all problems just by listening to us pray? Or is it that he would have done so even if we did not pray?

These thoughts continued to play in my mind when the police siren blaring in the temple courtyard broke the silence. They had come looking for us.

The policeman who had been punched was bleeding profusely from the nose and was shouting angrily in Haryanvi.

'Kahan gae who chhorre? Agar mil gae to unko maar maar ke bandar jaisi laal kar dunga!'

I was very scared as the police started questioning the temple staff about us. But they could offer no answers as to our whereabouts.

'Who are those two guys sitting over there?' A policeman asked a pundit pointing at us.

'They must be the two guys from the neighbourhood who come to the temple to worship every day,' the pundit replied. The policeman stared at us for a few seconds and then decided to leave.

After some time, when we heard the jeep leave, we took off the cholas and decided to head back. Suddenly I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned around petrified, expecting the Haryanvi policeman but I saw the pundit standing behind me.

'At least take the prasad beta. And why were those policemen searching for you?'

I narrated the whole story and asked him why he had protected us from the police. He smiled and simply replied, 'Who are they to punish you? If you have done something wrong, god must have noted it down. You will have to pay for it in this birth.' After that he walked back into the temple.

The words of the pundit stunned me. For one moment, I felt that I had done something really wrong.

I looked at Mickey, who was already removing the tarpaulin cover from the scooter. I looked at my watch. It was getting late. I hurried to help him and then we both headed back to the hostel. When we reached the hostel, we saw Mr Malhotra looking anxious as he waited outside the hostel gate. He was livid to see us come in late but his fury knew no bounds when he saw the condition of the scooter.

We tried to explain the accident to him cutting out the part where we were chased by the police, but he was in a hurry to get back home in time for the party so he was in no mood to listen to our story. Suddenly we realized that all the keys, except the scooter key, were missing from the key ring. Since the house keys were nowhere to be found, the man was wringing his hands in dismay.

We requested some time to look for the missing keys and he half-heartedly agreed to hand us the scooter again. Thinking about the incident, we surmised that the keys would have to be close to where the policemen had stood. It seemed stupid to go all that way back again so we stopped along the road to think of an alternative but there seemed to be no way out.

'Ronnie, man ... if there is no way out then, why worry about the situation? Let us have a beer, yaar! We have already been through such a mess. We will face Mr Malhotra later,' said Mickey. However, I felt sorry for the man though I did not want to disagree with Mickey.

We went back to the hostel after half an hour and seeing us return empty-handed, Mr Malhotra looked close to tears. He must have decided at that moment that he would never offer to help anybody. He fined us a thousand rupees each for the misconduct and went back to his house or most likely went in search of a vendor making duplicate keys. Anyway, his lunch with the Vice Chancellor was ruined.

There are good days and there are bad days. This was just one of the latter. This was the only way I consoled myself that day. Mickey seemed unrepentant.

He was still quite keen on going to Amritsar as he had planned to visit Sasha that night. The only option left was to go on his bike, which had a punctured tyre. But it didn't take too much thinking to resolve the issue. We saw another bike of the same model, which belonged to a first-year student who had gone home for the weekend. We could not fix the puncture so we exchanged the punctured tyre from our bike with a tyre from the fresher's.

Soon Mickey was on his way to Amritsar on his bike. I wished him luck and returned to my room to sleep off the exhaustion.

Mickey was supposed to return the next afternoon, but there was no sign of him. I waited till the evening but by nightfall, I was worried. I could not even contact him so I decided to wait till the next morning before calling his home.

Somebody knocked on my door late at night and it took me at least five minutes to get up from the bed and as I opened the door ready to hit the person who had disturbed me, I saw Mickey standing

there, smiling at me.

'Where the hell were you man? I was so tensed and I was not even supposed to call your home. Where were you these last two days?' I asked angrily.

'Let me relax a bit yaar.' He removed his shoes and sat on my bed.

I gave him a glass of water. He pushed it aside and grabbed the bottle of water instead and gulped half of it down and then narrated the whole story.

'I reached Amritsar on time, parked the bike at the two-wheeler stand near the bus stand and hired an autorickshaw to Sasha's house. I spent some time roaming around the streets and waited for it to get dark. Sasha's parents left the house at about 9 p.m. I called her from the local PCO and she asked me to drop in.'

I was listening with full concentration.

Mickey continued, 'I noticed that two guys from the adjacent house saw me entering her house. I ignored them and went straight inside. Sasha told me that these guys had a soft corner for her and would watch her every move but we ignored them.

'She was angry with me for calling her so late in the day but I apologized and told her I was starving.

'Sasha had cooked a lovely dinner. Her parents were supposed to return after two in the morning and we went to her room and switched off all the lights of the house. We were about to make love when we heard some noise outside the house in the street.

'Sasha saw from the window that there were many neighbours standing outside and those two boys who had seen me entering the house were leading them. They were pointing again and again towards the house and shouting loudly. It didn't take much time for us to understand the whole situation. Sasha began to cry while I tried to pacify her and I told her not to worry. I told her that I would hide myself somewhere so she could face the neighbours confidently.

'We had to find a place to hide, quickly. Suddenly, I noticed a bed with a storage box in the lobby. I told her that I would hide in there. Sasha pulled out the quilt in the box and I got in. There was no time to wear my clothes so I jumped inside along with my clothes making sure that a small opening was there to allow me to breathe while inside the box. Sasha went outside and returned with some men and women and the two boys who were talking about my presence in the house.

'They searched every corner of the house to no avail. Nobody thought of looking inside the box though. And everyone cursed the boys for having wasted their time and suspecting an innocent girl. When Sasha began to cry at the humiliation, the situation became even more awkward for the visitors. In the meantime Sasha's parents came back from the wedding. They too seemed astonished to hear the story. Soon after this, the neighbours went back home.'

I could not maintain my silence anymore and interrupted Mickey in between. 'And all this while you were simply sitting in that box?' I asked, amazed at Mickey's survival instincts.

'Yes, of course. What was I supposed to do, yaar?' Mickey replied.

'Sasha's parents closed the doors and her father changed his clothes and then sat on the bed where I was hiding. He asked Sasha to tell him the truth. Sasha convinced them that the fault lay with the boys who had been spying on her. They wanted to spoil her reputation because she would not be their friend.

'Sasha's father then asked his wife to sleep with Sasha in their bedroom while he slept in the lobby. Sasha obeyed her parents and went to sleep. I lay still in the box till my legs started feeling cramped.

But there was no other option than to lie there quietly.'

I began to laugh imagining the situation and Mickey joined me.

Then he continued with his story. 'In the morning, Sasha's father left for work and Sasha opened the box when her mother went for her bath. She was extremely worried about me. I somehow managed to get out of the box but was unable to stand. That I was naked was adding to my embarrassment. I quickly got dressed and was about to leave Sasha's house when she suddenly smooched me on the lips. I guess she was compensating for putting me in this situation. I hired an auto to the bus stand and rented a room at a hotel near the bus stand itself, ate something and slept. I do not think my body would have allowed me a three-hour-long bike ride. I woke up late in the evening and came straight away to the hostel.'

I was smiling at Mickey and asked him if he had had dinner. He was not feeling very hungry but we decided to go and have some parathas at a dhaba near the bus stand.

I could not get enough of the anecdote and we discussed it till we fell asleep.

Summer Training and Love

Summer training was one month long. It was mandatory and deemed a learning experience while studying engineering. Several companies approached us for placements for the summer and there was tough competition to grab a decent organization for two reasons. One, it would enable us to select the kind of domain we wanted to work in during the final placements. Two, it offered a good opportunity to explore a new city in some other part of the country at the company's expense.

Through his father, Mickey had already arranged for his training in Delhi with an MNC. Some of the other students also used their own sources to shortlist and finalize their summer placements. Those of us who had no influential background were dependent on our training-in-charge Mr Pele, to allocate us to the different companies that came to the campus.

Mr Pele hailed from Chennai. His attitude and sartorial style was very different from the other lecturers in the complex. Dark complexioned, short and with a small moustache, Mr Pele resembled a movie star from the black-and-white era. He would wear dark-coloured clothes, which dulled his appearance even as his white teeth gleamed when he smiled.

Mr Pele loved flirting with the girl students of the college. He would conspicuously avoid boys though. I felt that he had probably missed the company of such beautiful girls during his days as a student. He was bright and intelligent, but as far as I was concerned, he had all the power to make or break my summer. He could send me to a good company and brighten my future prospects or parcel me to the back of beyond and ruin my life.

Sid preferred to go to his hometown during the summer so he had arranged for his training at a local company which would give him the requisite certificate without any fuss. He wanted to prepare for an exam to facilitate further studies abroad and this seemed an appropriate time to study for that with no college to attend. While Sid was returning from Mr Pele's office he met me on the way and said that I had been selected to work in some backward area of Maharashtra, based on the list he had seen. This made me feel bitter. Another reason for my bitterness was that Monica had been selected to work at an MNC in Mumbai and some other studious guy was the second candidate there. For a second, I imagined myself in the rural districts of Maharashtra, my summer a mess and my future distinctly dark while some lucky bastard enjoyed himself with Monica in Mumbai. I shook my head and, desperate to do something, began to rack my brains to change things.

The company where Monica was due to train was called Savoy Ltd. It dealt with software programming and marketed these in six countries all over the world. It had a good standing in the

market and our college authorities wanted to send their best students to enable a better professional relationship with the corporate entity. I too wanted to grab the opportunity at any cost.

With no plans or contingency bail-out routes I approached Mr Pele. He informed me that the list had already been decided on the basis of merit and would be announced subsequently. He did not seem too thrilled at my presence in the room. I had to impress him in the next couple of minutes. But alas, it was not a girl I was talking to. That would have been easier!

I really needed something that he would relate to, so I started off. 'Sir, I have not come here to request a particular location for the training. I am here to learn how best to improve my vocabulary and personality. You are the best in both these aspects. You are an inspiration. I am preparing for the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) to pursue higher studies abroad and I just want some tips from you.' I knew that he was proud of his skills in the language and so hoped this would hit the bull's eye.

It had.

A wide smile spread across his face and he asked me to sit down. Given how pleased he was, I wondered if he had ever been praised in his life! He made me note down at least a dozen books to improve my vocabulary as I looked on admiringly.

Everyone loves to be looked up to, but Mr Pele craved to be put on a pedestal. I had touched the right nerve and after about thirty minutes he began to wind up the lecture as he had a class soon.

'Sir, it was a great honour and I thank you for helping me out.' I touched his feet and he hugged me. I knew he was not used to such a display of respect. But as we hugged I was assaulted by a heavy stench. His clothes smelled so bad that I stopped inhaling air for ten seconds. When he released me there were tears in his eyes.

'Son, do let me know if you need any kind of favour from me anytime. I will be pleased to help a good student like you.'

Finally! I thought he would never say it! This was my cue to say what I had come here for. 'Sir, I want to pursue my practical training at Savoy Ltd in Mumbai. It is my dream company and I will be grateful to you if you will consider me for this opportunity.'

I hoped he would not see through my trick. But he was gullible enough to fall into this trap.

'Sure son. I will be glad to send a good student like you there. The company had wanted two students from us for the summer training and the authorities decided to send one male and one female student to them. Monica has already been shortlisted for the task and you can join her. I will make the necessary changes in the list and will announce it tomorrow in the classroom. God bless you!' Then he left the room with a smile on his face. I ran towards the garden, away from the suffocation in the room, smiling to myself.

Mr Pele kept his promise and announced my name along with Monica's. I looked at her to try and gauge her reaction. She turned around to look at me with a half-smile on her face. But then I looked the other way, as I didn't want her to think that I was eager to be with her.

We had to leave for training in three days' time. The company had sent air tickets for both of us and the hotel booking was also confirmed. I was really excited. There was a flurry of activity in my house as my mother began preparing food for me to take and my father took me to buy formal clothes. Since we were supposed to take a direct flight from Chandigarh to Mumbai, my parents and Mickey came to see me off at the airport. Monica was already there with her mother.

My heart leaped as soon as I spotted her in a white suit. I introduced Monica to my parents and she greeted my mother with a broad smile and a big hug. Within five minutes, my parents seemed more concerned about her than me. I was given strict instructions to take care of her in Mumbai. Somehow I wasn't jealous that she was getting the attention!

Mickey as usual had the last word. 'Stick to her like a postage stamp. The stamp does not come off till the letter reaches its destination.' Then he made a face at me. We grinned and hugged and said our goodbyes. It was time to leave the family behind.

Once inside the aircraft, I tried to behave as if I was used to flying when the truth was that this was the first time for me. She was however, looking at everything awkwardly. I later discovered that this was the first time for Monica as well. I had got the window seat but generously offered it to her. The plane taxied and then accelerated and finally left the ground. Monica held my hand in fear and her nails pierced my skin but I didn't react. The other passengers were sitting calmly as if that was a normal thing to happen during take-off, so I guessed all was okay. Soon we were in the air. The pilot announced we could remove our seat belts.

Suddenly I noticed that Monica and I were holding each other's hands tightly. She was looking outside the window and her grip was strong. I was loving every instant of her touch and I wanted her to continue holding my hand throughout the journey. But I loosened my grip. She felt it and looked down and then, removed her hand.

'Sorry Romil. I didn't know when I held your hand.' She was embarrassed.

'It's okay. I can understand, as this is my first time on a plane too. In fact, you made me feel comfortable when I was getting nervous.' I gave her a naughty smile.

She started to giggle at that and I wanted to pat myself on the back for handling the situation so well.

'I hope you won't mind but I think I'm going to feel nervous while landing too.' I couldn't stop myself. I didn't want to miss another chance to hold her hand.

'Well, I don't allow strangers to hold my hand but we are friends now. Aren't we?' She cocked her head to one side as she said this and gave her hand to me. I shook it smiling. I was desperate to be her friend.

Then she started reading a novel and I went through the newspaper while surreptitiously looking at the beautiful airhostesses. They were all dressed in short skirts and had a permanent smile on their neatly made-up faces. Kingfisher Airlines was famous for its airhostesses and I was mentally congratulating Mr Mallya, the owner, for his great taste in women. Our in-flight meal was a delicious chicken tikka with a chocolate brownie and a sizzling cup of coffee. Things were just perfect when they got better. Monica put down the book she was reading and slept off after the meal, resting her head on my shoulders. I was happy that we were coming close but soon my shoulder started to ache. Yet I wouldn't dare move. I looked at her innocent face for a minute and felt like kissing her. Suddenly I noticed the novel she was reading on her lap. I carefully picked it up. On its cover were the words *Trust me* and the name of the author, Rajashree. I gazed at the back cover to read the synopsis.

It said that the protagonist of the novel had been ditched by many guys and had started to believe that all men were bastards and not to be trusted. I felt like striking the author then, because my motive was to have Monica trust me. On the other hand I knew that the author was right to some extent, as I myself had acted smart and broken many a heart in the process.

Monica woke up when the flight was about to land and, after fastening our seat belts, she held my hand with a smile on her face. At that moment I felt as if the gap between her fingers was meant to be filled by my mine. I was concentrating on her so furiously that I did not realize when the plane landed and when people started moving out. Monica shook me gently and prodded me to my feet.

A driver was waiting with the name of the company on a placard at the airport. It made us feel very important and official. After he loaded our bags in the car, we headed towards the hotel. We passed different districts of Mumbai and saw the skyline change interminably. A number of MNCs were headquartered in Mumbai. On one side was the Arabian Sea and on the other, the largest slum in Asia. Mumbai was no doubt a city of contrasts, where the rich and the poor co-existed, where some dreams were fulfilled and some broken. My dream was to acquire Monica's affections and I intended to make full use of the one month I had in hand to do this.

The driver took us to the Krishna Continental hotel located in a congested place called Nana Chowk in central Mumbai. The fifteen-storeyed building dwarfed the slums around it. The manager of the hotel welcomed us and allotted rooms on the eleventh floor. After checking the facilities, we followed the attendant to our rooms which were adjacent to each other. Monica was not hungry and wanted to retire early.

I requested her to wake me up at 8 a.m. given we had to report on time for work. And I was not a morning person. She shook hands with me and loosened her hair while entering her room.

I unpacked my belongings and took a cold shower. After living in the spartan surroundings of the hostel for two years, this furnished room was a welcome change. The food was complimentary and, once I was through with dinner, I asked the attendant about places to visit around the city. Then, I switched on the television and don't remember exactly when I dozed off.

The doorbell woke me up in the morning. It was ringing constantly. At first I tried to block the noise out with the pillow, but the insistent ringing made me angry and I opened the door wanting to yell at the attendant.

'What the hell do you think you are doing, man? Can't you see the "Do not Disturb" sign on the door? Is this the way you treat your guests? What do you want at such a late hour?' I blasted the person in front of me with my eyes still shut.

'Romil, I thought you wanted me to wake you up. I have been ringing the bell for the last fifteen minutes!' It was Monica standing there hands on her hips and glaring at me.

I immediately came to my senses and looked repentant while apologizing for my behaviour. What a mess, that too on the first day!

'Anyway, I guess it won't be too nice to show up at work in your briefs. So go on and change quickly.' She smiled wickedly at me and went downstairs for breakfast.

I got ready in fifteen minutes and then joined her at the breakfast table. She was almost through with her food. I quickly gulped a glass of juice, picked up two pieces of toast and followed her to the car. We reached the office in half an hour.

The receptionist welcomed us warmly and directed us to the third floor where Mr Sehgal, the project manager was waiting. Mr Sehgal was in charge of our training. He looked smart in his elegant formals. His hair was neatly combed and he was clean-shaven. I liked the combination of green tie—white shirt. His friendly smile added to his personality.

Mr Sehgal asked us to sit down and then introduced himself. He called the office boy and asked him to bring in three cups of coffee.

I looked around the room in the meantime. There was a big table behind which Mr Sehgal was sitting. He had placed some books on marketing on the table. There was also a vase of flowers there, along with a small family photograph. There was a coat stand in one corner of the room.

He started his briefing with an overview of the project. The training schedule included ten working hours from nine to seven and, to our disappointment, included Sundays as well. Monica was not happy after learning about the tight schedule but it was fine with me, given we would be together the whole time. I thanked Mr Sehgal silently.

Then Mr Sehgal handed us the training manual explaining our project in details. He asked us to study the manual for the rest of the day and start with the training the next day.

The company cab dropped us back at the hotel where we had lunch. Monica was planning to go back to her room to study the manual. I didn't want to be left high and dry wishing that I could have had her company for a longer period of time if we had studied together.

'So what are your plans for the rest of the day?' I asked her casually.

'Well, we need to study the manual, na!' she replied.

'Don't tell me that we are going to study for the rest of the day! The training schedule is already too demanding. We have got a chance today to explore the city. If you wish to accompany me ...' I left the sentence open.

'Not a bad idea at all. Let's study for the next two hours and then go out. I want to shop for something for my family. And don't keep on sleeping in your shorts, sir.' She winked at me with a smile and instantly I remembered Mickey doing the same thing.

I showered and got ready. I tried on a couple of different shirts and settled for a white one with blue stripes that I had always got compliments for. Then I pulled on a pair of pants and combed my hair. I was ready. I was so excited that it was difficult for me to sit in one place. I began watching a music channel on the television with the songs blaring at full volume. When there were still ten minutes to go, I could contain myself no longer, and knocked on Monica's door. She took some time to answer and when she did, I was astonished. She was looking extremely hot in a white tube top over blue denims. She gave me a broad smile and requested five minutes to touch up her makeup.

The door of her bathroom was open and I caught sight of her undergarments hanging inside. I looked at them and turned around closing my eyes. I was cursing myself for thinking cheaply of Monica.

We handed over the room keys at the reception and caught a taxi. Then we roamed all around town and I saw a number of south Indian restaurants, which I thought of trying out. Monica was looking at the beautiful city, replete with British architecture and narrow cobbled paths. The taxis and double-decker buses seemed to jostle for space with the pedestrians.

The taxi driver charged us according to the metre reading, which was impressive, and we then walked down Fashion Street where hawkers sold garments at economical prices. There were also vendors hawking shoes, books, artificial jewellery and toys among other things. I did not find the place very interesting but Monica pointed out some good stuff we could get here. The only shop where I paused was the one selling books but I was not interested in poor-quality paperbacks and so moved ahead. Monica haggled with the vendors.

Soon I was beginning to sweat. Mumbai's sultry weather was beginning to get to me. The fragrance of the deodorant was gradually giving way to body odour and the gel I had used on my hair was streaking down my face. At last, Monica bought a top and a pair of shorts and declared that she was tired too. We had nimbu paani from a roadside vendor and ventured towards Chowpatty Beach to get a view of the setting sun.

It was very crowded and just not like the place I had imagined it to be. The sea was very dirty and there was a huge pile of garbage floating in the water. Monica was not very thrilled with the place either, so we went to an eating joint, making our way through the crowd, holding hands to stay together rather than out of any romantic feelings.

We landed at a pav bhaji shop and ordered two plates. Monica told me that this was the authentic pav bhaji and the variant we got in the north was an adaptation of this. Marine Drive was our next haunt and we walked down to the points where several films were shot. This place was as crowded if not more so.

There was no way of chatting in peace. I was frustrated and wanted to kick the small stones on the road, irritated that nothing was going according to plan. My first so-called date with Monica was a big fiasco. Even Monica seemed upset. Her makeup was gone and her hair was a mess and she was trying frantically to manage it with her hands. Finally, we left for the hotel to sleep off the exhaustion.

I showered for the third time and changed into my t-shirt and shorts. I switched off the lights and started watching television. I was upset and was thinking about the day when the telephone rang. I looked at the clock. It was half-past twelve. I answered the phone. It was Monica who did not sound very happy and wanted to know if I wanted to share a cup of coffee. My heart began to beat faster and I agreed to accompany her.

Within thirty seconds, I was outside her room. She opened the door and invited me inside with a smile. She was wearing the purple shorts she had bought that day and I was quite surprised to see her dressed like that in front of me. I was trying my best not to look at her long, waxed legs but they were simply irresistible.

She made some coffee and offered me a cup with some cookies. I complimented her on the outfit and coffee and she smiled back.

'Romil, you know something ... I didn't think very highly of you before we came here. There were some rumours in class about your connection with Payal. My friends also asked me to take care of myself and not get too candid with you.'

'Okay! Then why are we sharing a cup of coffee at this time of the night?' I asked.

'I don't judge a person based on what the world says. I don't know about your connection with Payal but it hardly matters to me. All I know is that I had a good time today and I feel safe with you. The way you held my hand and led me through the crowd at Chowpatty made me feel really nice and secure. Moreover I didn't feel that you were trying to take advantage of me. You seem to be a nice person, Romil.'

I was happy to hear that and said, 'Well, my friends call me Ronnie and it's an honour to have the most attractive girl in the college say so.' It sounded like flattery but I was sincere in my praise. She blushed and started to giggle.

'If you don't mind, can you let me know whether you and Payal are going around? In fact she is such a smart and beautiful girl. You are lucky if you people get together.'

'Hey, it's nothing of that sort between us. We are just friends and I admire her. And moreover, she could get many smart and rich guys. Why on earth would she select me, yaar?' I lied to her but deep inside I wanted to let her know the truth.

'Okay ... I believe you, as we are friends now and I know that you will not lie to me, as I hate liars. But why do you underestimate yourself? You are no less than any other guy in any respect.' She finished her coffee and put the cup on the table.

I smiled but didn't feel the need to respond. I was suddenly feeling good. Maybe the day had not been so bad after all. I drank my coffee without a word.

She asked me to tell her more about my life. We kept on chatting till the topic shifted to something that interested me—love.

'Well do you believe in love? Does it exist in this world?' I started the conversation.

'I don't think so, Ronnie. The thing called love looks great only in romantic novels and movies. In real life, no one has the time to love anyone. Every person is selfish and demands something in return. Money, lust, power and greed are what drive the real world. Love is simply rubbish and in my opinion, if you want to lead a happy life, it is better to stay away from it,' she said all this very seriously.

I kept mum for a minute, as I was not expecting such a tirade from her. She looked at me expectantly. I smiled at her and just murmured, 'At this point of time I don't know the exact definition of love but it is definitely not the way you think it is. Our views definitely contradict each other on this topic. I don't know what experiences made you come out with such a viewpoint. I ensure you that being in love is a great feeling.' I didn't know where those lines came from or why I said them. But looking into her eyes then, I felt like flirting a bit.

'I'll wait for that day! Ronnie, you seem to be a very romantic person. Anyway, we should sleep now as it is too late and we have our training tomorrow morning.'

I gave her a small hug and went to my room. It was so soothing to lie on the bed after such a hectic day. I could sense the beginnings of a relationship here and I felt happy. Before I knew it, I was asleep.

Monica and I

Monica woke me up by calling on the intercom and asked me to meet her in the coffee shop. I got up and showered, feeling quite happy because I had heard her voice the first thing that morning. It was the first day of the actual training. I wanted it to turn out really well. The laundry boy delivered a well-ironed set of shirt and trousers to my room and it didn't take me more than fifteen minutes to get ready. Monica was already downstairs, having her breakfast. I had kept an eye on my wristwatch and ensured that there was enough time to have a relaxed breakfast that day. As soon as I joined her at the table, she asked me about the manual, which we were supposed to have studied before the training commenced. I gave her an innocent look and told her that I had not even touched it. She laughed and told me that she had also only gone through the first half of the manual.

As Monica was busy studying the manual we didn't talk much during our drive to work. I knew that I was not going to get anything out of it in just half an hour, so I opted to look out of the window.

'You don't feel like going through the manual even once, Ronnie?' she asked.

'I don't think it is going to help me now. Tell me if you think I ought to know something,' I answered.

'Well, I told you that I have not read it carefully. But we have to go through only the first half of the manual, since the second part is about marketing the company's products. There is a customer survey done in 1998 in the second part. Our training deals with the technical part only.'

I gave her a small smile and looked at the first page of the manual, which was a bibliography. I had a habit of noticing the publishers of books.

When we reached the company's office, Monica started to feel restless, as she was worried that our first impression on Mr Sehgal would not be very positive. She was also surprised that I could feel so comfortable in such a situation. Well, she didn't know that Romil Khanna had been in more complicated situations than this and knew how to tackle such problems.

Mr Sehgal reached his office at the same time as us. He shook hands with us and smiled encouragingly.

'So, have you gone through the manual? Ready for the practical training?'

Monica and I immediately clammed up. I knew that I had to handle the situation, as Monica would spill the beans sooner or later. So I decided to do the talking.

'Of course sir, we went through the manual but after discussing it we came across some flaws in the manual.'

'What? What kind of flaws?' Mr Sehgal's face changed its expression within seconds. He was not expecting this kind of response from us. How could he expect that two second-year engineering

students would find flaws in the manual? Monica was looking at me wide-eyed in shock.

I knew that I had dealt the cards blindly. And the net result could swing any way. But I had to control the situation now and I was confident, as I had done it many times before.

'Actually sir, the manual was last published in 1998 and has been used for the past so many years. No doubt the technical aspects are the same and we will need to concentrate on these as a part of our training programme. But if we look at the second part of the manual, which includes the marketing aspects, there is a customer survey that was conducted a long time ago. I don't know whether or not another survey has been conducted recently, but I would expect a different response, since views change with time. I know that our job is to focus only on the technical aspects, but since we were asked to read the entire manual, we could not resist pointing this out. If you agree with us, it might be a good idea to conduct a new survey along with the normal training programme and help you to update the manual.' From the thoughtful look on Mr Sehgal's face, I knew that I had done it again.

He thought for a minute and then smiled, which boosted my confidence.

'Well guys, I think the company has not made a mistake choosing you both for the training programme. I have been in charge of this programme for so many years but have never come across such a suggestion. It clearly shows that you have studied the manual in detail and are sharp enough to notice flaws. I strongly recommend that you conduct a fresh survey and look at the marketing aspect of the products too. You guys have twenty days to complete this and then submit a report to me. If you come out with good results then I will write you an appreciation letter and give you a stipend of Rs 10,000.' Mr Sehgal let us go after that.

As soon as Mr Sehgal left, Monica jumped up and down and hugged me as I stood there smiling. Now this was the icing on the cake. I wanted to grab her, but I resisted the temptation by standing still with my fists balled tight.

'You were brilliant Ronnie. How the hell did you come out with that? I just told you that the manual was divided into two parts and you made him believe that we went through the entire manual and even won a chance to earn a stipend of ten thousand rupees. Well, I am impressed, Mr Khanna.' She winked and started to giggle.

We went to the cafeteria after that and ordered a strong coffee each. This was the time to get serious about the training, otherwise the good impression Sehgal had of us could get trashed. We drew up a plan to manage both the projects within the time we had. Monica was supposed to make all the notes for the technical training and explain them to me later. I decided to draw up the questionnaire and plan the survey.

As the training schedule was quite hectic, both of us worked very hard. I visited the company's library and collected data from the Internet for my questionnaire, which included all aspects of the software we were supposed to study. As the days passed, Monica and I became close.

When almost fifteen days had passed, we increased our time at work and sat up late at night.

I noticed that sometimes Monica would be quite sad but she never discussed it with me.

I phoned home and would talk to my folks regularly. Mickey of course was another regular caller. He would keep encouraging me to get physically closer to Monica. But things were different this time. My conscience did not allow me to go too far with her. She was not like the other girls I had known.

But wait a second ... There was nothing wrong with the girls I had lusted after. Recalling my behaviour towards them I felt really bad. I felt like I was the worst person in the whole world who had only tried to take advantage of the girls, just to get them into bed! All these thoughts were disturbing me as I lay in my room after yet another chaotic day of the training.

'Hey Ronnie ... hope I am not disturbing you.' Monica entered my room without even knocking on the door.

I came out of my thoughts suddenly and greeted her with a smile. I started to clean up the mess on my bed by shoving the dirty clothes aside. She helped me clean up and kept on complaining about the messy nature of boys.

'Ronnie ... you know the time given by Mr Sehgal will end within the next four days. Are we ready for the presentation?' I now understood the motive behind her sudden presence in my room.

'Don't worry yaar ... I am almost done with the questionnaire and I have also got data for customers who can be approached. All I need is a single day to execute the survey. These questionnaires can easily be filled later, based on the result desired. What say?' I was prepared with my shortcut as usual.

'Are you sure the professionals sitting in the seminar will not discover that the survey is rigged?'

'Just trust me, Monica. I can handle it. What about your technical preparation?'

'That is not a big issue at the moment. They have taught me all the aspects of the product and I can easily make a presentation. And when you are with me, I feel everything is possible.'

Whenever Monica praised me, my heart beat faster. But we did need to work on the presentation. The one-day market survey yielded unexpected results, which could be really useful to the company. I knew that if I was able to present my findings well, then the appreciation letter and stipend was not far off. I worked really hard over the next three days and Monica and I spent nights together suitably modifying the presentation.

It was the last day of the training and we were supposed to deliver our presentation the next morning to the company's board of directors. Mr Sehgal was expecting a great performance and so spoke highly of us to the other members.

For the first time in my life I was on the verge of panicking. All the hard work we had done in the past twenty days was going to be judged in half an hour.

I woke up on time that morning and both of us dressed formally. I wore a suit that I had brought along for this day. Monica was ready when I rang her on the intercom and we discussed the critical points over breakfast. We reached the venue on time and went straight to Mr Sehgal's cabin. He was already sitting there checking his mail. He told us that he was going to the theatre to check if everything had been arranged as desired. The presentation was supposed to start in the next fifteen minutes.

As Mr Sehgal left the room, I asked Monica to hand me the pen drive in which the presentation had been saved. She searched her pockets but the pen drive was not there. She had forgotten it in the hotel room! She started crying and I got equally worried about the situation.

'What will Mr Sehgal think of us? All of them will think that we have not prepared the presentation. No one will believe us. I have messed up everything. I am so sorry Ronnie ... I will take the entire blame on myself. It is not your fault. I was supposed to bring the pen drive. I am such a loser.' She kept crying.

I looked at the clock. We had ten minutes to do something ... but what? I closed my eyes and saw Monica's smiling face. How could I let the girl I loved get into trouble like this?

I took a deep breath and asked Monica to stop crying and listen to me very carefully.

'Monica ... This is the time to show our real character. We have worked so hard for the training and we cannot mess it up just because we do not have anything written out. We have worked on it practically and we can present it without the slides too. We just need to be confident. Do you understand what I am trying to say?'

'How is it possible, Ronnie? Your stupid tricks are not going to work everywhere. They are professionals sitting out there and they will treat us like fools if we go there unprepared.' She had stopped crying by now.

'If you can trust me, you have to join me. I have a plan. We are not going to present what they expect. We will give them something they haven't even thought of. We will act as opponents rather than presenting it together.'

'What are you talking about, Ronnie? We will just be treated as the stupidest fools they have ever seen.'

'I am demanding your cooperation, Monica, if you really trust me. We will be treated as liars even otherwise, so what is wrong in taking a chance?' I was trying my very best to convince her though I was not sure of it myself.

She nodded her head in reply and I heaved a sigh of relief. I began explaining the plan to her. She would need to remember the gist of the technical training she had attended. As soon as I finished with my plan, an attendant entered the room and told us to come to the lecture hall.

As we began walking towards the venue, Monica stopped, opened her purse and dabbed on some lipstick! I could not refrain from smiling. Girls needed to touch up their makeup even during such critical moments!

This act of Monica's also relieved a bit of the tension and as we reached the presentation room, we began to feel much better. It was a much bigger auditorium than we had expected and at least fifty people were sitting there. We were taken aback at the sight. Mr Sehgal was already on stage holding the microphone and there were a couple of more students from Bangalore who were also presenting before the board that day.

Monica was ready to cry again but I held her hands and reassured her that all would be well though I was sure we would be the laughing stock this time. The other pair looked so sure of themselves! Mr Sehgal introduced all of us to the staff members. The pair from Bangalore were asked to deliver their presentation first and their project manager introduced them and indicated the kind of training imparted. I understood that there was a sense of competition between both the project managers.

The other guys had worked on the technical aspect of their product only and for the most part their presentation revolved around that. Both of them presented it slide-wise and read the content directly from the projector. I looked at the audience. Most of them were busy with their mobile phones and I could see that some people were trying to avoid yawning. The much-awaited end came after almost forty long minutes and the people applauded as formality demanded.

Then we took centre-stage. Mr Sehgal introduced us again and mentioned the topic on which training had been imparted. And much to my chagrin, he didn't hesitate in letting people in the hall know that

we had made some additions to the normal training programme.

I wished Monica the best as both of us stepped onto the stage from opposite ends. Everyone was staring at us. I chose to avoid eye contact with the audience. I demanded another microphone for Monica. Everyone was looking at the board to view the presentation.

Monica was looking at me with an expectant face. Mr Sehgal was standing on one side of the stage and looking at us anxiously. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath and started with the presentation.

'Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I see that you are all waiting for the presentation to appear on the projector. But we have not prepared a presentation for today.' I paused. I wanted to shock the audience so that what I said later would be more effective.

There was absolute silence in the hall. Mr Sehgal looked tensed and I saw his features turn rigid as his rival smiled.

'Please don't be surprised, but the excellent training provided by our project manager, Mr Sehgal, has made it possible for us to do away with a written presentation. We have attended various aspects of the training programme and we don't think that a few slides can cover all the valuable aspects imbibed by us during the training. So we have planned an interactive session in order to discuss all the things we have learnt from the company.' Everyone was stunned but we had managed to grab their attention.

I continued, 'I don't understand why training is only focussed on the technical aspect when marketing is more important in order to sell the product.'

'Well, I don't agree with the views of my friend on this subject. If we do not concentrate on the technical aspects of the product, then marketing the product is not possible. You cannot fool the customer. As all marketers say, the customer is king,' Monica interrupted.

'I agree with you that technical aspects are important but if the company only focuses on technology, then how does the turnover increase? What matters in the market is the book size of the company and it is possible to raise it only through marketing. Even if we are not technically strong, we can sell the products if we market them well. I can sell a comb to a bald person when you will spend time explaining the technical issues of the comb to him,' I explained, giving an example.

'But for how long can you sell the products like that to the customer? It could result in a minor rise in terms of volume of sales but if you want to focus on strategies in the long run, you need to be technically strong too,' Monica argued.

We kept arguing for some time and we could notice that people were enjoying this much more than the boring presentation they were expecting. After ten minutes, we cleverly agreed that the growth of the product in a company depended on both technical and marketing aspects equally.

Then I let the audience know what I had covered in my questionnaire to gauge the customers' views on the product and company as a whole. Monica, on the other hand, discussed the major technical issues we were taught during the training. It was not difficult to discuss those issues in general.

Before the presentation got too lengthy, I asked Monica to give a summary of the technical issues and then, I followed up her statement with the findings I had made in the market. The head of the department was listening very carefully to us. Soon I declared the presentation over and told the audience that a written presentation would also be made available via e-mail to all the people present if they required it.

There was silence for a few seconds and then, suddenly the head of the department stood up and started applauding. The rest of the audience followed suit and the entire auditorium echoed with the applause. Mr Sehgal ran up to the stage and congratulated us for such a wonderful presentation.

The head of the department also praised us and announced the promised stipend of Rs 10,000 to us. Tough times were over and as people started to exit the auditorium, some came to congratulate us for a job well done.

I didn't make any eye contact with Monica during all this time. We had our lunch with Mr Sehgal in the company's dining hall and he gave us his personal e-mail address and contact number and asked us to contact him regarding any kind of help ever required. He even told us that we were supposed to return to Chandigarh in two days' time and so asked me to get the tickets arranged after talking with the concerned person.

Monica and I were finally alone when we were on our way back to the hotel in the cab. There was not a bit of doubt that Monica was highly impressed with me.

'So what plans, Ronnie? Are we ready for it?'

I looked at Monica. I was not able to figure out what she was getting at. I kept on looking at her without speaking.

She continued, 'We still have a day with us. Let's use it well. Okay, let me ask you something, Ronnie. If I were your girlfriend, how would you make this one day the most special day of my life?'

I was still speechless. 'Is she indirectly propositioning me? No. It's not possible. She is not that type of girl.' I was getting confused.

'Okay then. I'll make a plan so we can enjoy ourselves and it will be the most memorable day of our lives. But on one condition, you have to trust me. There will be no cross-questioning later.' I was getting excited now.

'Of course I trust you, dumbo. You still need to ask that? Come on; go ahead with your plan,' she replied without even thinking for a second.

'Listen then. We have to leave for Chandigarh the day after tomorrow. We are leaving for Goa tonight. When we reach the hotel, just rush to your room and pack all your belongings. We will check out today itself and then catch the train to Goa. We will reach there by morning and we will have a full day and a night to enjoy ourselves there. I am going to request Mr Sehgal to get our tickets booked from Goa itself and he can cut the extra cost incurred from our stipends. Is that fine with you, young lady?' The plan was ready in no time. I was just waiting for her response.

She took some time to respond but the reply was a positive one. I asked the cab driver to wait outside the hotel and drop us at the railway station after that. After telling the manager at the reception about our sudden check-out plans, we headed to our rooms and started packing our things.

After completing the check-out formalities we left for the railway station. Luckily, there was a train to Goa in just half an hour after we reached the station. I called up Mr Sehgal on our way to the station and he happily agreed to arrange the tickets from Goa and also ensured that the cost would not be debited from the stipend we had earned. Everything seemed to go smoothly. We got two tickets and soon were on our way. We shared the cubicle with a newly married couple. We had dinner on the train and Monica chose to sleep soon after. I listened to some songs on my iPod. The light in the compartment was

switched off soon. It was a full-moon night and things were quite visible inside the compartment even after the lights were turned off.

I dozed off soon but some noise woke me up in the middle of the night. The voices I heard were soft and different from the noise made by the train on the tracks. I rubbed my eyes and tried to locate the source of the noise. I was bewildered to see the married couple trying to make love ignoring the whole world around them!

Their clothes were lying strewn all around. But they had at least the decency to cover themselves. I could easily see the man lying over his wife and both had their eyes closed tight. The woman was moaning. I was sleeping on the top berth and Monica was directly below me. I suddenly remembered her and tried to move forward to see her. Our eyes met.

I realized that she too had been watching the couple at play and we felt so embarrassed that we turned away. I didn't try to look at her thereafter. The couple finished their copulation and the moaning changed to satiated snoring.

We reached Goa by nine in the morning. I tried to behave as if nothing had happened at night. The first thing we had to do was find a room in a hotel. We hired a cab and asked the driver to take us to some nice budget hotel near the beach. The cab driver took us to Hotel Sea View where I saw that the tariff was on the higher side. A single room was priced at Rs 3000 per day. It was stupid to hire two rooms at this rate so I looked at Monica who immediately understood the situation and agreed to move into another hotel.

It was not easy to find a nice hotel with a tariff less than that in Goa. It would have resulted in spending half the day just searching for one. Somehow I collected my guts and asked her if we could share a room. She thought for a minute and then replied, 'Well, I agreed to this trip on one condition of yours. And I agreed because I trust you. So go ahead.'

I gave her a small smile and asked the receptionist to book a single room for us. The room was on the second floor of the hotel. It was a very nice room with one double bed, a couch and a dining table on the other side of the room. It included a balcony with a view of the sea. It was very different from the beach we visited in Mumbai. I could see a lot of foreigners sunning themselves on the beach. There were several beautiful girls in bikinis and of course I was glued to this sight.

'Hey, Ronnie! If you can take a breather from scanning the babes outside, we can explore the city.' Monica was looking at me with both hands folded upon her chest and a mischievous smile on her face.

I came inside the room scratching my head awkwardly. We got ready in the next half an hour. I looked at the clock. It was already 12 noon! I picked up swimming costumes from the hotel storeroom and asked Monica to carry them in her bag as we would need them later.

Though it was very sunny, the cool breeze from the sea made the day comfortable. We were both feeling hungry after such a long journey; not having eaten since the previous night was taking its toll on me. We decided to eat at a seaside restaurant where I found that much of the menu consisted of seafood. Monica wanted to have vegetarian food. I chose prawns. Monica was looking at me warily as if I was eating the most horrible food. I found the para quite delicious. Monica finished her grilled sandwich in the meantime.

The next stop was at a bike rental. We hired the cheapest bike. Soon, we were exploring the roads of one of the most beautiful cities of the country. It was one of the best moments of my life. Sitting behind

me Monica hugged me tightly while I raced the bike.

We reached one of the most famous beaches of the city and there were many people there. The crowd consisted of both locals and foreigners. Water sports were also advertised and as I spied opportunities, I felt my excitement treble. I asked Monica if she wanted to join me and she seemed eager. We got the tickets from the counter and started off once we had our safety belts in place.

The boat started and we began to float on the water. Soon the boat accelerated and we started to feel the pull and tug of the belts, and the wind. We were both screaming as we ascended. The experience was thrilling. I felt like a bird. I could not get enough of the sport.

The next thing we did was get a temporary tattoo on our shoulders. We got the same tattoo with 'Friends Forever' written within a heart. We rode aimlessly for a while after that, and when we reached the outskirts of the city, we spotted a beach that seemed less populated. It had just two shops around it. One of them was a wine shop and the other was a small bistro, which looked similar to the one we had lunch in. I picked up two bottles of beer and a cold drink for Monica.

The best thing about this beach was that there was no one to stop us from taking the bike near the water. It was such a wonderful feeling to ride the bike at full speed on the shore with water splashing all around us. We were almost wet and shouting at the top of our voices. I stopped the bike near a tiny cottage and saw a small boy standing outside it. He told us that his father had constructed the cottage and he was away in Mumbai for some work. His name was Kiri and in no time he became our friend. I had my beer and we planned to swim in the sea. Monica changed into her swimsuit inside the cottage.

I was just stunned to see Monica in her swimsuit. It was a bikini and she definitely looked very hot! We went into the water and played games with a small ball that Kiri had. We were hugging each other under the water and sometimes my hands would go around her waist and at other times they would unintentionally touch other parts of her body. Monica however seemed to enjoy herself and did not make a fuss.

Kiri was waiting near the cottage looking after our belongings till we came back. He asked us to shower inside the cottage, as there was a tub of fresh water in the bathroom. We showered, taking turns, and got ready to return to the city. Monica wore her shorts this time with a white t-shirt that had the words 'I look like Monica' painted on it. It made me smile and she smiled back at me while combing her hair.

In the meantime Kiri asked us to stay there for ten minutes, as he wanted to bring something for us. He ran away from the cottage before we could say anything. We were alone and there was complete silence in the cottage. The only sound we could hear was of the breeze and the waves outside. Suddenly, an idea came into my head. I was on my knees and I asked Monica to dance with me.

'But there is no music, na?' Monica pointed out.

'Well, I can sing for you lady. Just try to feel the music in the air.' I moved my hand forward again.

She didn't disappoint me this time and held my hand. I put my right hand across her waist and brought her closer. We were so close that I could feel her breath on my face. Our eyes met and held.

Neither of us wanted to break it. We started to move slowly to a song that I sang, *Ae kash ke hum hosh me ab aane na paayen*.

This was a romantic melody and soon Monica joined me in singing the song.

I can't recall when we came so close that we were hugging each other. Her lips were trembling and I was finding it hard to resist. I wanted to kiss her.

'C'mon Ronnie. Just go ahead and kiss her. This is what you always wanted to do. This is what your best friend Mickey told you to do. Just look at her body. She wanted you to make the first move or else how do you explain her agreeing to share the room with you?' said a small voice in my head.

Another voice, more stern, said, 'Listen Ronnie. You are not such a bad person that you will make use of the girl who trusted you blindly. Would you like to break the trust she has placed in you? Of course, she will not resist your kiss at this moment but will you be able to make eye contact with her later on? Just ask your conscience, Ronnie. You know the answer.'

As both voices fell silent, I looked at Monica. Her eyes were shut tight and her grasp around my waist had become firm.

I didn't want to leave her but I loosened my grip around her waist. She felt it and opened her eyes; she glanced at me and then, moved away.

Suddenly Kiri came back to the cottage. He had brought something—an extraordinary combination of two seashells that if joined together form a heart. He gave it to us to keep as a token of love. He told us to take care of it as both of us hugged him.

I started the bike and Monica sat quietly behind me. She was not hugging me tightly this time and kept her carry bag between us. We were both feeling hungry again and were too worn out too so we decided to head back to the hotel. After a one-hour journey with stops to ask for directions, we reached the hotel.

Monica went up to the room and I decided to return the bike to its owner. After making the payment, I came back to the room. I was so tired that my legs were aching. When I got to the room, I knocked on the door. Monica opened it. She seemed to be getting ready for a shower, as she had a towel round her neck.

I asked her to get ready after showering so that we could have dinner near the beach. But she was so tired that she just smiled and nodded. After she bathed, I went into the bathroom and freshened up in ten minutes. We both went downstairs and I asked the manager to arrange a table for two near the beach.

The arrangements were completed soon. Since it was a full-moon night, the beach was beautifully lit. I ordered a vodka and Monica started with a soup. The cool breeze was making the ambience very romantic. We discussed the wonderful days we had spent at the training and promised each other a long-lasting friendship. Food was also ordered but I could not resist a few pegs of vodka after such a hectic day.

'Hey Monica ... you know something ... nothing!' The vodka had started getting to my head.

'Tell me Ronnie, what is it? We might not get such a wonderful moment again. Feel free to say whatever you want to say.'

'Monica ... These days with you were the best days of my life. I don't know whether everything is going to be the same after getting back to Chandigarh but the only thing I want from you is to maintain the trust you have placed in me. I want to confess something that at the cottage near the beach I nearly lost control and wanted to kiss you. You know I liked you from the first day I saw you in college. Before meeting you, I didn't believe in love at first sight. I love you Monica ... I love you.' The words came out before I could stop them.

'Ronnie ...' she replied calmly, 'you are too drunk. We should get back to the room. I don't think a confident and smart guy like you needs alcohol to express such feelings. Since you are drunk, I can't trust you. We will talk about it later.'

Monica got up from the table. I tried to get up too but was not able to—I'd had way too much vodka. Monica tried to lift me up and made me move towards the room and I kept on murmuring that I loved her. I don't remember when we reached the room and I slept.

When I got up at eight in the morning I was feeling very thirsty and there was no water near the bed. My head was also aching. I took out a bottle of water from the refrigerator and drank it. I tried to open my eyes and put some chilled water on my face. Suddenly I thought about what had happened last night. The last thing I remembered was my confession of love to Monica. What had happened after that? The very thought made me anxious.

I looked around the room and saw Monica sleeping on the couch. The t-shirt she had worn yesterday was lying on the floor and it was torn from the front. She was sleeping there in another dress. Did I try to force her to get physical with me? What could she be thinking about me? How had I dared to do that? I held my head in both hands and sat down. Tears started to flow down my cheeks as I looked at her innocent face.

Monica woke up after half an hour and was stunned to see me sitting on the floor in that manner. She started laughing when I apologized for any misbehaviour the previous night. I also told her what I had assumed had happened.

Once I had calmed down, she told me what had actually happened. She had brought me to the room and I had fallen on the bed. She had removed my shoes and my shirt and then pushed me back. As I was already snoring she had changed in the room itself. When she was removing her t-shirt, I had suddenly muttered her name and thinking that I was awake, she had fumbled and the t-shirt tore.

I sighed in relief. We didn't discuss anything else about the night and packed our things as we had to reach the airport by eleven and it was already fifteen minutes past nine. Monica gave me the seashell heart that Kiri had gifted us and asked me to take care of it.

Everything happened smoothly thereafter and we reached the airport on time. The journey back to Chandigarh was a bit sad, as we were going our separate ways after such a great time together. We also felt happy because the training had been good fun and we had earned a good stipend.

The flight reached the Chandigarh airport on time and our parents were waiting for us. Everyone was so excited to see us but we were trying to look at each other repeatedly. Soon we bade goodbye and moved towards our respective homes.

The Modern-Day Devdas

I was not able to concentrate on anything after returning home. Everywhere I looked, I saw only Monica. College was due to begin in two days' time and the calls from my batchmates had made it very clear that the news was out—Monica and I had had a very successful training and were honoured with a stipend too. Everyone thought that Monica was the reason for our success and I was strangely content to let them think so. Even if I had tried to explain the real situation, I was sure nobody would have believed me.

On entering the hostel, the first people I spotted were the gatekeeper and my pal, Mickey. We hugged each other as if we were meeting after years. Mickey enquired about the training and we decided to swap experiences later. We had to reach the college for the semester registration formalities, so after tossing my bags in my room and paying the mess bill, I was on my way to college.

I was really excited to get back. Seeing old faces, catching up with people, enquiring about their projects—it all felt good. When I was busy filling my registration form for the subjects allotted for the next semester, I saw Monica coming towards me. My heart skipped a beat and I stopped whatever I was doing. She came to me, shook hands with a genuine smile on her face. We talked for a few minutes and then she excused herself to meet her other friends, who were becoming suspicious. Mickey punched me on my back and asked me about the progress I had made at the training. I knew what he was hinting at, so I smiled back at him and asked him to fill his forms before lunchtime.

What happened next was most unexpected and, for me, unwanted as well. I accidentally bumped into Payal, whose bag toppled from her shoulder, spilling its contents onto the floor. I started to help her pick up her things; our eyes met suddenly and I saw her glancing at me affectionately. I smiled at her and handed over her bag. I looked up to see Monica staring at us from a distance. I got confused and chose to move towards the washroom.

The registration formalities were over by the afternoon and I was about to leave for the hostel. Almost half the college was already vacant by then. At that very moment Payal came to me and told me that she wanted to speak with me. I could think of no reason why she wished to do so. However, we went to the garden near the university. I chose this place so we would be undisturbed by the university crowd. My immediate worry was to avoid being seen with her. Moreover, I thought it would be a good opportunity to end the relationship and say goodbye.

I told Mickey to meet me at the hostel in the evening and took his bike to reach the garden. Payal was already there waiting for me. Her stretched t-shirt was not enough to grab my attention as before. Bizarre ideas kept popping into my head but I could not figure out the actual reason for our meeting.

'Hi Ronnie ... How are you?' Payal started the conversation.

'I am fine. What about you?' I had nothing much to say.

We started strolling.

'I am good too. So how was your training in Mumbai with Monica?'

There, she had said it.

Now I started to realize the real motive behind our meeting. I crossed my fingers.

I feel we guys always want to avoid obvious situations but girls never let us succeed. They somehow get to know what we are up to.

'The training was quite a success. We learnt a lot and won a stipend as well.'

'Yes. I heard. Congratulations for that. So how is Monica?'

I was alarmed at the mention of her name again.

'She must be fine. Anyway, how was your training?' I tried to change her focus.

'I didn't go for any training. My dad arranged the training certificate from someone he knows. So, you both had a good time there?'

I sensed that there was no way out.

'How would you define "good time"? We went there for training and were very busy meeting our deadlines. It was not an uncomplicated job. Can you please come to the point why we are meeting here all of sudden?' I was getting annoyed.

Payal stopped walking and stood there sensing the sudden change in my tone.

'So you want me to come straight to the point?'

'Yes,' I said firmly.

'Well there are many things that I have heard about you and Monica. Earlier, your name was coupled with mine, but it's different now. You have used me to the extent you wanted to. Now when there is nothing in me that interests you, you have decided to move on. But I still have feelings for you and I can't see you with any other girl.'

I was not ready for such charges. But now that everything was out in the open, I tried to justify the scene.

'Listen Payal, I had no intentions of using you. Whatever happened between us was based on mutual attraction. I still like you and want to continue as friends but I have to confess that I am not in love with you. I think we should move on now,' I told her.

'How dare you say that! You are no one to decide whether this relationship will continue or not. You have to be with me or you'll be sorry.'

Her expressions told me that she meant what she said.

I lost my temper. 'Who do you think you are? If you think that you can continue this relationship by threatening me, you are mistaken. I still wanted you as a friend but given your current attitude, I guess you have lost that right as well. Just do whatever you want to do. I don't give a damn about you anymore!'

Matters got out of hand very quickly and I seemed to have lost out to anger.

I started to move towards my bike and Payal kept standing there looking at me. I chose to head straight to Mickey so that he could suggest some way out of this troubled situation.

After reaching the hostel, I hurried towards Mickey's room. He was fast asleep but I kicked him hard enough to wake him up. He woke up, rubbing his eyes, and asked for water. After drinking from the bottle, he made me tell him everything as it had taken place. I saw that he had become tense too. He thought for a minute and then suggested that we discuss this over a drink as his brain was not working.

He asked me to bring a bottle of vodka from the market and went out to arrange other necessary items meanwhile. The clock was striking seven. I liked his idea and took his bike and once I had ensured I had my wallet, set off.

It was around eight when both of us settled in Mickey's room. After showering, we had changed into comfortable clothes and were now listening to ghazals as we gorged on egg bhurji, curd and fried daal from the mess along with some roasted papads. After we had downed two large pegs, Mickey asked me to tell him everything again.

I told him the whole situation as I finished my third peg. Mickey listened to me patiently and asked me what I thought was the worst thing Payal could do. I suddenly came out with a simple line.

'She can tell Monica everything that happened between us.'

'Is that a big problem?'

'Yes.'

'But hey, even if she tells Monica everything, how does that affect you?' his brain started to work after two drinks.

'Is something going on between you two? What happened there? Tell me everything,' he asked with a sparkle in his eyes.

'Nothing much happened. She is a very sweet and intelligent girl. We spent quality time and got to know each other better. We stayed in the same hotel in adjacent rooms. She used to wake me up early in the morning. Both of us made our plans to go through the training and impressed our project manager to a great extent. We used to spend a lot of time together and stayed up late at night and nothing extraordinary or shocking happened between us.' I recalled all those lovely moments I shared with her during the training.

'Don't tell me that she allowed you to stay in her room till late and you didn't make use of the situation. This is not you!' His doubt was genuine.

'No man ... Believe me it didn't even strike me once to get close to her physically. She trusted me a lot and I didn't want to break that trust.' I was being truthful.

'What else happened, then?' Mickey was serious this time and we had consumed almost three quarters of the bottle. Mickey made two more pegs for us.

'Well, the training went very well and we decided to celebrate our success in Goa.'

'Goa? That sounds cool, man. She agreed to go with you to Goa? Did something happen there?'

'No, man. It was a beautiful experience. We shared a room there and that day was the most wonderful day of my whole life. We went paragliding and then we went from one beach to the other on the bike I had hired from a local vendor there. In the night we enjoyed a dinner by the beach and I got drunk over there and she took me to the room. Then, we came back to Chandigarh.'

'Ronnie, whether you agree or not, that girl wanted you to get physical with her and she gave you several hints. But you made a mess of the whole thing.'

'It's not like that, yaar. She is not that kind of girl. I am emotionally involved with her now and want to spend my life with her.' I was getting emotional and the bottle of vodka inside me was acting as a catalyst and helping me express my feelings.

'No, man—the girl allowed you to stay with her in a room and you are still justifying her character? You should have gone to the limit with her. She would have been wonderful.' Mickey was really drunk and his voice was louder than normal.

'Mickey! You should mind your language. I am telling you that I love that girl and you are just making a cheap joke out of it.'

'Ronnie, I know these kind of girls. All they want is to have fun with guys but at the same time they want the guys to take all the initiative so that they can blame them later on as Payal did. Monica is the same category. You should treat all of them in the same way. Remember the 3F rule—Find the face, Fuck the base and Forget the case.'

Mickey suddenly stopped. I slapped him and he seemed too stunned to react. It was my turn to speak now.

'Mickey—I told you that I am in love with that girl and you are comparing her to Payal and using foul language. You know something, I used to think the same way as you but there is a thing called Love. And when you love someone these physical desires become meaningless before it. I hope you will understand it one day. I was here to share my feelings with my friend but I don't want to share them anymore with a sex maniac and a fool.'

'Just get out of my room and never dare to show your bloody face to me again. Get out!' Mickey was screaming at the top of his voice.

I didn't want to see him anymore and decided to move out of his room. Before leaving, I glanced at a picture on Mickey's wall. Both of us were hugging each other and smiling in it. My heart ached and I moved towards the door.

When I reached the door, Mickey snatched the picture from the wall and threw it on the floor, and the glass shattered. We both knew very well that these shattered pieces would be very difficult to join.

I went to my room and fell straight on the bed. There were tears in my eyes and I kept looking at the fan rotating above my head. I slowly fell asleep.

The morning after was different. Subsequent to the fight with Mickey, nothing was the same. The places where we used to hang out and have fun suddenly seemed very dull and strange. The cafeteria where we used to spend hours having samosas and staring at chicks seemed an unfamiliar place. Mickey and I used to watch most of the movies, first day, first show. It did not really matter if the movie was good or bad. It did not matter if the movie was a comedy, romance or tragedy. It did not matter if it was a Walt Disney flick or a C-grade south Indian adult movie. It was fun when we watched them together. We used to eat late at night at the dhabas near the bus stand and railway station. I missed the nights when we would drink as if there was no tomorrow. Our conversations never seemed to end; there was always something more to tell, a few more jokes to share and a few more secrets to reveal.

Even the greatest friendships in the world run into bumpy roads. Everyone fights with his or her friends every once in a while, whether it's a small misunderstanding or an atomic blow-up. Because our close friends mean so much to us, fighting with them often hurts us deeply making us angry, frustrated and sad.

Slowly, I began to realize that the number of people I knew on the campus had reduced all of a sudden. The worst thing was to pass Mickey in the hostel corridors without making any eye contact. Sid tried to set things right but eventually gave up. Both of us had lost the special connection.

This was not the only thing that ruined my days. Worse was to follow. The day after my fight with Mickey, I caught Monica staring at me in class. I was unable to concentrate on the lecture and kept looking at my watch so that I could leave the classroom as soon as the lecture was over.

After the lecture, I went to the canteen, ordered a sandwich and a cup of tea and took a chair away from rest of the crowd. I was drinking tea quietly, staring at the wall when suddenly I heard someone call my name. I turned around to realize that it was Monica. There was no one in the canteen as everyone was busy attending the lecture. I asked her to take a seat.

She refused to sit and told me that she wanted to talk to me about something important. I stood up from my chair and asked her to tell me the matter.

'Romil, I thought I had some misconceptions about you. I thought you were basically a nice and honest person. I really loved the moments we shared in Mumbai and Goa and I will remember them throughout my life. But I came to know some other things about you after returning to the university and now my conscience forbids me from being your friend. You are not the same person as I had thought you to be.' She sighed as her eyes filled with tears.

I stood there, stunned, listening to her.

'There must be some kind of misunderstanding, Monica ... At least let me know what you have heard about me.'

My heart was beating faster. Deep inside I knew that I was wrong but I was still hoping for some chance to save myself.

'Payal came to my room in the hostel last evening. She told me what you had going with her before the training. You told me that you were just friends but just tell me one thing, what behaviour defines friendship for you? Does it mean getting physical with a girl and then discarding her like trash? Is this the kind of guy you are? Now Payal is blaming me because you have dumped her. Please don't do that to her. I can't believe that I thought you were the best person I had ever met. In fact, you are a bad omen who ruins the life of the person who comes close to you.'

'Monica, I wanted to tell you that whatever Payal and I had between us was over. I was unable to tell you during the training. I confess that I have not been a good person but as we became closer, I have changed. Please believe me ... I am not the same old person you have heard about. Please trust me.'

'Trust you? Now you are kidding.' Monica tried to end the conversation and the relationship.

There was sadness and mistrust in her eyes. 'Romil ... It was very nice meeting you. You have taught me the lesson of a lifetime. I will never be able to trust anyone now. Please never try to contact me. Goodbye!' She turned around and started to walk with quick steps towards the college gate.

I was still standing there looking at her. Something had broken inside me ... my heart for sure. I could feel it shattering into a thousand pieces. Then it began to rain and it looked like nature was compounding my misery and also sharing it.

It was the worst feeling I had ever had in my life. I closed my eyes for a minute and all those moments we shared floated in front of my eyes. I recalled everything. Being in her hotel room and trying to work out the plan for the training programme, making the presentation, her hugging me after

listening to my plan, the long drive near the beach and the dance at the cottage. All those memories made me feel weak and I cried my heart out.

After a few hours I washed my face, controlled myself and walked towards the hostel.

If I was thinking about any person other than Monica that day, it was Mickey. I needed him then, very urgently but I suddenly remembered him throwing our picture on the ground and chose not to approach him. I went to my room, shut the door and fell on the bed, my clothes still wet from the rain. I was weeping, feeling guilty about all the things I had done with other girls who had come into my life. Now I understood what heartbreak really meant ... I didn't know when I fell asleep.

Sid woke me up in the evening. He turned on the lights and asked me where I had been that day. When he saw my wet clothes and wet bed, he asked me several questions but I refused to answer him. He tried to convince me to share my problems with him but he was unable to break my silence. After some time, he got irritated and left.

I felt as if I had a raging fever. I changed my clothes and thought about going to the market near the university to get some medicine. It was almost eleven and I was not sure that the medical store would be open. I didn't have any vehicle and didn't feel like borrowing one. I decided to walk and by the time I reached the market, all the shops were closed. I hit a stone with my foot, when suddenly I saw a shop still open at the other end. It was a liquor shop and I could not stop moving towards it.

I saw that it was full as it was a rainy day. People generally thronged to such outlets when it pours. I purchased half a bottle of whisky, a plastic glass, a bottle of water and two small packets of chips and moved towards the university. As I was passing by the cafeteria, I saw some empty benches. I didn't feel like going to the hostel so I sat on one of those benches with my booze. Sitting alone in the dark I was smiling at myself looking at the glass of whisky in my hand. I had never imagined that I would be in this deplorable condition even in my worst dreams. I gulped down the whisky and tried to rest on the bench.

A security guard of the university woke me up in the morning. I saw people playing games on the ground; some overweight students were jogging and others, exercising. I realized I had slept on the bench the whole night. The guard asked me to go to the hostel, as he recognized me and knew that I was a student. I felt a bit ashamed and returned to the hostel. I remembered the previous night and graded it as the worst of my life.

The worst pain in life is when people you know become the people you knew.

The most difficult phase of life is not when no one understands you; it is when you don't understand yourself. This was exactly what was happening to me. I was unable to understand what to do and who I could depend on. I understood one thing—you reap what you sow. I had hurt the feelings of many girls and god was cursing me for my misdeeds. The words of the pundit in the temple came back to me.

I started spending a lot of time alone in the hostel and listened to sad songs on my laptop. Luckily, I had the shells gifted by Kiri and I would hold them tight and kiss them again and again. Every time I kissed them, I would begin to weep and talk to myself. In the meantime, I also got my share of the stipend from the company and the money was enough for me to buy liquor every day.

My condition did not go unnoticed, and most of my batchmates guessed that it had something to do with Monica. Days passed and I spent my time in the company of alcohol and the shell. I refused to

shave and wore the same unwashed clothes all the time. I missed classes and looked dishevelled. I could hear people laughing behind my back but all those things hardly mattered to me.

The only good thing to have happened then was that I got a new friend, a stray dog I named Boxer. He was always there whenever I needed him. He lived on the outskirts of our hostel and he would listen to me as he ate the food I carried for him every day.

The monsoons were at their peak and some days it would rain for almost twelve hours. One day I had already gulped down half a bottle of whisky and was preparing to collapse drunk. Suddenly thoughts of Boxer flooded my mind. I opened the door of my room and started to look for him in spite of the pouring rain. I kept on shouting his name but he was nowhere to be found. I didn't lose hope and kept on searching for him.

Boxer was the only friend left and I didn't want to lose him.

Suddenly I saw him standing in a small shed, barking. I ran towards him as if I had found some treasure. I reached the shed and saw that someone had tied him there. I untied the rope and hugged him, falling on the floor and getting my clothes dirty in the mud. Boxer kept on licking my hands and face.

I started to talk to him. 'Boxer ... my brother ... you know how much I love Monica ... and she thinks I am a flirt and was flirting with her too ... It is not like that yaar ... I love her ... I really love her from the core of my heart ...'

I took out the shell from my pocket and showed it to Boxer.

'See Boxer ... This is the token of our love. The left side is my heart and the right side is Monica's ... and see how they are fastened together ... Boxer ask god to forgive me ... I am really sorry yaar ... please bring my Monica back. Please bring Mickey back ... I can't live without them.'

I started to cry and shout at my loudest and hugged Boxer tightly. He kept on licking my tears but he was as helpless as I was.

Next morning, Sid came and insisted that I get ready to attend class. I resisted a lot, but he forced me to come with him to college. After so many days, I got dressed in clean and ironed clothes, after having showered and combed my hair. It felt good. I liked my bearded look. I smiled at myself and followed Sid to college. As I entered class, I looked at Monica. She was wearing a yellow suit and looked as beautiful as ever. She looked at me; our eyes met for a few seconds but then the teacher came inside and the moment was broken. I hurriedly took a seat and became conscious that I was sitting next to Mickey.

I smiled at him but he looked away. Mr Bhatt, the English teacher, was from the other department and I had not attended a single lecture of his course during the whole season. He noticed that when I answered the roll call. He seemed a nice person and didn't react to my long absence.

He asked the class to close their books as he was going to narrate a saga of love. The students started whispering, as they were all keen to hear the tale.

Students always welcome a love story. And the fact that it was coming from a teacher made it more interesting.

Mr Bhatt started, 'Well, this is a story of a soldier and a princess. Once upon a time there used to be a kingdom whose princess was very famous for her beauty and intelligence. There were many people who wanted to marry the princess and among them there was this poor soldier. He used to be in awe of the princess. But deep inside his heart he knew that the princess would never marry him as he was so poor and she was royalty.

'One fine day, when the princess was out on a jungle safari, the soldier got the chance to be part of her convoy. In the middle of the jungle, they encountered a hazardous storm and the convoy got lost. The soldier kept his courage and somehow was able to take the princess to a safe place. The princess was terrified as she was alone in the jungle. This was the best time for the soldier to make the princess aware of his feelings. The soldier did his best to arrange food and shelter for the princess and she was happy with his efforts. As the time passed, the soldier was successful in attracting the princess. Meanwhile the army was sent to find them and the princess was taken back to the palace. The soldier was left alone again and he started to feel disheartened and lonely.

'Meanwhile the neighbouring state attacked the kingdom and there was a declaration of war. The soldier was ready to fight for his land but he wanted to admit his love to the princess before going to war. He somehow sent the message to the princess to come to the balcony at night and he went there near the palace escaping the guards who were on duty. He couldn't gather the courage to express his feelings so he just opened his arms towards the princess and asked her to come to him. The princess understood what the soldier was trying to say but she was afraid of getting caught and the harshness she would have to face after that. She kept on thinking the whole night and the soldier kept on waiting but she was not courageous enough to act. Finally, in the morning she ran towards the place where the soldier had been standing and came to know that he was already away at war. She thought of waiting for him so she could tell him how much she loved him when he returned.

'The soldier fought bravely in the war, died there and never came back. The princess went into shock. She was not even able to express her feelings to the man she loved. She stayed unmarried for the rest of her life and kept on loving the soldier.'

When Mr Bhatt finished the story, I noticed many eyes were wet. I noticed Monica looking towards me but she averted her gaze when I noticed her.

Mr Bhatt suddenly pointed towards me. 'Let us hear from the boy who is attending the class for the first time. What is the moral of the story?'

I stood up. I was not ready for the sudden question. But I was ready with the answer somehow.

'Sir, the moral of the story is that we should let the people whom we love know how much we love them. You never know when those people will go away. And we may regret for the rest of our lives the fact that we had not revealed our feelings when the time had been right. This world is too small for hatred. We should try to fill the void with the love which exists between us.'

Mr Bhatt started to clap at my answer and the other students joined him.

'Well, that was such a nice way to interpret the moral of the story. But one has to be in love to understand this story. Okay let us know how you define love.'

I looked at Monica and saw her tense face. I didn't want to embarrass her so I gave a funny reply to his answer.

'Sir, love is when I can't pay attention in class because I am too busy writing her first name and my last name.'

Everybody started to laugh at my answer. Mr Bhatt smiled and soon the lecture was over.

Mr Bhatt and most of the students left the room. Suddenly I noticed Payal coming towards me. I tried to ignore her but there she was right in front of me.

'Ronnie, I am really sorry for messing up things for you. I know very well how upset you are. I have realized now that what we had going between us wasn't love. Love is what you feel for Monica and what she feels for you. I tried to tell Monica that too but she refused to accept anything. I am sorry that I became the reason for your breakup with her. I was feeling so guilty and wanted to confess. If possible, please forgive me. God bless you.'

I was so relieved that day. But when I reached my hostel room, I again felt the same stumped feeling in my heart and took out the bottle of the leftover whisky. I could still see Monica's face before my eyes. It didn't even vanish upon closing the eyes. Suddenly I realized that the bottle was empty. But I required more whisky for the night. I started to walk towards the liquor shop near the university. While on the way, I started to throw stones as far as I could. This was another way to take my frustration out.

I reached the shop, bought half a bottle of whisky and a plastic glass and poured out a peg. Suddenly, a guy joined me at the table. I looked at him and instantly recognized the face. He introduced, or should I say reintroduced, himself to me. 'Hey kid! Remember me? I am Ali Bhai, the man whose money you and your bastard friend stole. Did you think you could escape me? *Haan?* You will not go back alive today. Give me my money right now or get ready to break some bones.'

He tossed the whisky from the glass at my face. I was taken aback. My guts, strengthened by the whisky I had already consumed, enabled me to reply that I would not be able to return his money at that moment. He punched me as soon as he heard that. I fell to the ground and his people began to kick me. I shouted for help but there was no one around. My nose was bleeding and my lower lip was cut. When Ali Bhai realized that I would not be able to return his money, he asked his henchmen to kill me. I was helpless. His men held me by the collar and pushed me towards a tree trunk. A big man holding a knife in his hands faced me and I knew that my end was near.

Suddenly a miracle happened. A bike approached us at full speed and crashed straight into the man coming towards me. I tried to recognize the biker and was astonished to see Mickey. He fell from the bike and suddenly my other hostelmates came over on many other bikes. All the students circled Ali Bhai's gang. The students were holding hockey sticks in their hands. Mickey was in front, punching Ali Bhai and asking him how he had dared to hit me. The other men didn't even have the courage to move, as the students outnumbered them.

I somehow gathered all my courage and stood up. My body was aching, my lips were bleeding and my clothes were torn and dirtied by mud. Mickey was still kicking Ali as hard as he could. Ali was asking him to stop and was shouting in pain. Suddenly Mickey took a rod from the roadside and was about to hit Ali on his head when I reached there and held the rod and tried to take it away from Mickey's hands.

Mickey was asking me to leave the rod.

'Ronnie, leave me man. How dare he hit you? I will kill him.'

I could feel my eyes fill with tears and my heart fill with love for my friend. I requested him to let go of the rod and made him swear on our friendship. Mickey calmed down a bit and let go of the rod and after kicking Ali one last time, turned around to hug me. It was the best feeling in the world.

'Mickey ... My brother ... Thank god, you are back. You don't know what happened to me. I was all alone in this damned world. I am so happy that you are back. Now I don't need anything else. I don't have any more complaints to make to god. Now if you are with me, every problem will get sorted out.'

Mickey hugged me tightly and even his eyes were wet.

'I am sorry Ronnie. I didn't understand your feelings for Monica. I was so wrong. Please forgive me, man. I knew that you were going through a tough time but my ego didn't let me come to you and confess my mistake. When Ali and his people were hitting you, Sid was passing by and he called me at once on my mobile. I just forgot everything and came here with all our other friends. If I had been late today, I would have lost you and would not have been able to forgive myself.'

'It's okay man. You don't need to feel sorry for me.'

Apologizing isn't about bowing down to your friend or becoming a doormat. It's about taking responsibility for the mistakes you make and inviting the other person to take some amount of responsibility too.

After that, Mickey stepped towards Ali's gang. Ali was also standing with them. He told them that he would deliver his money within a week. He also warned him not to be seen in this area again. Ali was already waiting for a chance to get out.

I thanked all our other friends from the hostel and sat behind Mickey on his bike. Mickey told the other friends to get back and that he would reach there in some time. We got two cans of beer from the shop and went to the cafeteria of the university. We celebrated our reunion and emptied the cans in one gulp. I hugged Mickey again. I told him about what had happened between Monica and me and how upset I was.

Friendship is like a violin. The cords may loosen time and again, but the melody plays forever.

Mickey asked me to listen to him very carefully.

'Ronnie. C'mon, be a man ... what has happened to you buddy? You can make any girl in the world fall in love with you and as far as Monica is concerned, she has already fallen for you. I know there is a misunderstanding between the two of you but it can be resolved. Payal told me that she tried to convince Monica that there was nothing between the two of you and all that happened was a big mistake. The time is ripe, strike now. But you have to do that Ronnie style. What I do know is that you are going straight to her hostel to propose to her, finally and formally.'

'What? Are you mad? How can I go at this time of the night to the girls' hostel?'

'Rascal, just remember the story we heard in the classroom today about the princess and the soldier. Just go and propose to her right now at her hostel. And if she really likes you she will accept the proposal today, otherwise she doesn't deserve you. Got it? Let's go outside the hostel. I will wait for you there. Stop whining and start winning.'

I was feeling nervous but the pep talk from Mickey made me accept his idea. Mickey took me outside the girls' hostel. He told me that Payal wanted to get the two of us to mend our relationship. Payal was in the hostel that night and on receiving Mickey's message would bring Monica to the balcony. He also explained how I could get to Monica's room.

However, getting inside the girls' hostel was a big problem. There were security guards all over and the walls were high and covered with sharp pieces of broken glass and barbed wire. We surveyed the entire wall but didn't find any loopholes to get inside.

Finally we sat on the ground frustrated. I didn't want the plan spoiled at any cost but there didn't seem to be any way out. I closed my eyes and prayed to god.

Boxer licked me and I opened my eyes. He was licking my hands as usual. And I made him shake hands with Mickey. I told him how important both of them were for me and how Boxer listened to all my problems when Mickey was not around.

Boxer stood up and walked away as if he was unaware of what I was saying or as if he wanted to convey that since Mickey was back, he would no longer be needed. In the meantime, Mickey thought of bringing a rope and climbing over the hostel wall.

Suddenly, I heard Boxer barking—it seemed as if he were barking from the other side of the wall. Both of us stood up in excitement. There must be a way for Boxer to get through to the other side. I called Boxer by his name and looked around to find the opening from which he would emerge. Suddenly, I saw Boxer's head behind a heap of garbage accumulated on one side of the wall.

'Hey Mickey, there seems to be a way to the other side of the wall near the garbage dump.' I called out and looked around for Mickey.

Mickey wasn't listening to me, as he had already reached the dump and was removing the garbage, using a big stick. I joined him in the task. Soon, we were able to locate a hole in the wall big enough to let me pass through it. I took Boxer in my arms and hugged him tightly.

Mickey gave me his mobile and asked me to send a message to Payal asking her to bring Monica out. Mickey chose to stay outside the hostel and wait for me. I followed Boxer inside the hole and reached the lawns of the girls' hostel. I knew that it would not be possible to reach Monica's room so I would have to propose to her from here, that too without speaking. I looked here and there for some more help and suddenly I saw a room facing the lawn, which was supposedly the storeroom.

I reached the room and turned on the cell phone's light to see its contents. There were lots of spare wooden pieces, broken tables and chairs, boxes of paints, a lot of candles and other waste. Suddenly an idea came to me. I took a big blank chart paper from among the rags in the storeroom and used the paint to write what I wanted to say on it. I collected this and rolled it up when the paint dried. Then I picked up all the candles lying there. I traced the room where Monica's balcony was supposed to be. It was almost three in the morning and the lights were switched off in most rooms. Then I inserted the candles in the ground in a certain manner. I was almost ready with my plan but still one thing was missing—a matchbox.

I looked for one in the storeroom but did not find it. Then I thought of looking for it in the gatekeeper's cabin. I tiptoed towards the gatekeeper's room and saw him sleeping. I could not believe my luck. There was no matchbox on the table, so I had to enter his room to look for it. I pulled myself together to do this. He was fast asleep. I tried to open the drawer, making as little noise as possible. There was a matchbox in the drawer.

I don't think I have ever, before or since, been happier to see a matchbox. I picked it up and stealthily left his room without disturbing his nap.

I messaged Payal about my presence in the hostel and asked her to bring Monica to her balcony. I thought Payal would be asleep and would possibly not reply to my message. But Payal's reply came within seconds. She asked me to wait for five minutes and wished me best of luck. I sat there looking at Monica's room.

Within five minutes, I saw the lights in Monica's room being switched on. I was getting nervous but started to get ready to propose to my princess. Soon Monica came to the balcony and rotated her hands

to ask me what I was doing there at such an unearthly hour. I put my finger on my lips to tell her to be quiet. And picked up the bundle of posters I had made. I pointed towards them and asked her to read them. I started to pick up the posters one by one and started showing them to her.

I had written the following:

Poster 1 'I KNOW I AM THE BIGGEST FOOL IN THIS WORLD.'

Poster 2 'I AM AN IDIOT TO HURT YOU AS I DID.'

Poster 3 'I AM STUPID TO BE HERE AT THIS TIME OF THE NIGHT.'

Poster 4 'BUT STILL I HAVE A PROPOSAL FOR YOU.'

Posters 5 'JOIN ME IN THIS STUPIDITY.'

Poster 6 'WE ARE PERFECT FOR EACH OTHER.'

Poster 7 'TRUST ME FOR A LIFETIME.'

I saw her standing still and looking at me. I picked out the matchbox from my pocket and started to light the candles. When I had lit all the candles I looked at her with both my hands spread out. The candles read 'I LOVE YOU'.

I was standing there waiting for my princess to come to me and I knew I had found a better method than the soldier had in proposing to her. Monica was still standing there looking at me. Suddenly a breeze started to blow out the flames of the candles. I was still standing there looking at her. I don't know what was going on in Monica's mind but she kept staring at me. It started to rain but I didn't run for shelter.

Then I saw Monica was not standing in the balcony anymore. Soon I saw her running towards me in the lawn. She was in her night suit and was looking as stunning as ever in the rain. She came close to me and hugged me tightly and I responded in the same manner. She started to hit me on my chest and started to cry. I apologized for the past and vowed to spend my life with her.

She closed her eyes and I kissed her on her lips at four in the morning.

Suddenly I saw a light coming towards us. It was the gatekeeper. He was awake and, having heard some noise from the lawn, was coming to investigate. We got away from each other before the gatekeeper could reach us. And smart Boxer ran towards him and jumped on him. The gatekeeper ran to save his life. He must have been astonished to see a dog attacking him without even barking. Boxer did not bark and wake the other residents of the hostel. I asked Monica to go back to her room and change and promised to meet her the next day in college.

I started to run towards the hole but was bewildered to see it filled with rainwater. It was impossible to pass through it now. The only option left was to get out from the main gate and I started to run towards it without further delay. The gatekeeper was still busy trying to fend off Boxer and I picked up the keys from his room and opened the main gate and then ran to where Mickey was waiting.

Mickey was standing there looking astonished as I came out of the main gate. He started his bike and I jumped on the pillion seat as he rode out. I knew Boxer could take care of himself.

Everything seemed to be back on track now. But I could not forget the days I spent alone, drinking and crying. Sometimes life teaches you a lesson but in the end, all is well. And if it is not well, then it is definitely not the end.

Without pain there is no pleasure, without valleys there are no mountains and without hard work there is no sense of achievement. Be positive are the two words that can make anything possible in this whole world. Loss, defeat and pain are nothing but the stepping-stones to success, provided one thinks positively in adverse circumstances.

On the canvas of life, we go off colour, but as long as the right people are there to add the right shades, life can be an auspicious rainbow.

All my life, I kept asking myself one question. 'What does my heart want?'

That day I got the answer. My heart wants the love, trust and friendship of my loved ones.

Epilogue

five years later

'A sizzling chocolate brownie with vanilla icecream ... and a thick chocolate shake ... Thank you.' Monica gives her order while sitting at Café Coffee Day in Chandigarh. Then she looks at me. I read her eyes and hand over my credit card to the waiter.

We got married last year. I work for a leading bank in the country after finishing college and Monica runs a coaching institute. She seems to be doing really well. We are in the café for a small get-together with our old buddies. It has been a while as work has kept us busy after college.

Suddenly, the manager of the café announces that someone has dedicated a song to me. I look at Monica, who is busy enjoying her brownie, paying no heed to the announcement.

I look around, wondering who it could be, when I see Mickey playing the guitar at one end of the café accompanied by Sukhi and Sid who are part of the chorus.

'Yeh Dosti hum nahin todenge ... Todenge Dum magar ... tera saath na choddenge ...'

I smile and cry. I run towards them and hug them tight. I join them in the song and sing loudly as everyone at the café cheers and claps. Finally, Monica finishes her brownie and clicks a photograph of us.

Soon, we come to the table and share our news. I thank Mickey again for selling his bike in order to give Ali Bhai's money back to him.

'College was definitely the best time. When else would our parents spend several thousand rupees a year just for us to go to some strange town and get drunk every night?' Mickey says.

Suddenly a hot girl wearing a mini-skirt enters the café. Mickey, Sid and Sukhi sigh deeply. I would have done the same, but being a married guy, I control my feelings.

I can see that Mickey feels sorry for me. Suddenly Monica comments, 'Don't stop yourself, na. Look at the girl if you want to darling ... I know you are dying to check her out. But I can look much sexier than her and every guy over here will be busy looking at me. Don't blame me then.'

'C'mon honey ... I am not even looking at the girl. Why would I? I am sitting with the love of my life.' I don't know how she reads my mind but I manage to handle the situation anyhow.

'Shut up and don't talk to me. You guys are all the same. You can't change.'

'But what did I do, yaar? I didn't even look at her.' I try my best to mollify her.

Mickey laughs at us and announces loudly that he would never get married. In the meantime, I was able to look at the girl's legs.



Acknowledgements

The idea of writing a novel came to me rather uncannily. I had got my annual job appraisal and thanks to my boss it was not on the better side of the bell curve. I was so disappointed that I shot a mail to him saying: 'A bad boss and a good wife will make you successful one day.' I was very frustrated. To distract myself, I began to read a novel. After I finished reading it I confided to a close friend that I could write equally well. She believed in my words and the book is here today because of that belief.

This novel would not have been possible without my parents' blessings and my elder brother's interest in my writing. I thank Ajay Bhatt and Sumit Arora for their companionship—I can never forget those four riotous years of engineering: of boozing till dawn, hitting on girls, planning for future businesses, fighting with the other minnows of the batch. This novel could not have come into being without the strength of this friendship. Long live our friendship. Cheers!

I would also like to thank Prema Rathi and Priyanka Chawla (now Priyanka Sandhu) for editing the rough draft and coming up with invaluable suggestions. A word of thanks to Deepak Bandlish for giving suggestions every now and then during the entire project; other friends Parvinder, Praggy, Swati and Hitesh (brother-in-law) for their enthusiasm.

Sincere thanks to Kanishka Gupta of Writer's Side, for his consistent support. I am grateful to Ravinder Singh for having explained the publishing business to me and for introducing me to Kanishka Gupta. A big thanks to the entire team at Penguin Books India especially Vaishali Mathur for having conviction in my work.

Priyanka Sandhu—my wife. This would not have been possible without her support, motivation and unbiased advice. She made me believe in myself. She was the first reader of every chapter.

And finally I want to categorically state that this is a work of fiction, so read it like one!

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi 110 017, India

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

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Penguin Group (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published by Penguin Books India 2011

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ISBN: 978-01-4341-502-2

This digital edition published in 2012.

e-ISBN: 978-81-8475-517-6

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