

A NOVEL

BEST  
DAYS OF  
MY LIFE

CHILL-KAR  
DC++BUNK

BACK-BENCHERS  
NUDEMARATHON

DESPO  
τβπGPL

ollege

LIBRARY=KHANDAR  
PROXY-MAAR-DE

DAARU-PARTY

BAKCHODI

GYAAN-MAT-DE-SAALE

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## **Nothing Has Changed**

“Bhaiya, why have you stopped the car here?” Neil asked his driver when he stopped the Mercedes outside the entrance gate of NIT, Surat.

“Please go ahead and stop at that *tapri* (tea stall),” Chinu instructed. His real name was Chandrakant but he was baptised as ‘Chinu’. Though he hated that name, he was glad that he wasn’t named Pikachu or Chaatu.

Both of them were visiting their alma mater after almost four years. The driver inched forward and halted at Gopalbhai’s *tapri*. It was a small tea stall that served tea, cigarettes and a few snack items like poha, biscuits and bhajia. They stepped out and approached the tea-vendor.

“Gopalbhai, how are you? Do you recognise us or not?” Neil teased.

Gopalbhai grinned, turned to his boy and quipped, “Chhotu, look, some big shots have lost their way today.”

“Gopalbhai, why are you making fun of poor people like us?” Chinu defended, extending his hand to greet him.

“Chhotu, two cups of special tea for our special guests,” Gopalbhai ordered while shaking hands with Chinu. “So, Chinubhai, what would you like to have? Mild or strong?”

“Give me one Four Square.”

Gopalbhai took out a cigarette from a packet and gave it to Chinu.

“What about you, Neilbhai?”

“I have quit smoking.”

Chinu lit his cigarette and took a deep puff.

“So, what is the purpose of this visit?” Gopalbhai asked.

“The students were missing us so they asked us to share our experiences at MindBend. I told them to ask you instead since you are aware of all our pranks and mischiefs,” Chinu said.

MindBend is one of the largest annual technical festivals of western India, organised by the enthusiastic student community of NIT, Surat. It is a four-day event which hosts technical exhibitions, panel discussions,

workshops, guest lectures, online events and competitions.

Meanwhile, Chhotu served them two cups of tea. Neil took a sip and closed his eyes.

“*Waah*, Gopalbhai, *waah*! Amazing! The same taste! Nothing has changed.”

Gopalbhai was embarrassed and gave a sheepish grin.

After finishing their tea, Chinu pulled out Rs. 5000 from his pocket and handed it to Gopalbhai.

“*Mehmaan se paise nahi lete* (I can’t take money from the guests),” Gopalbhai said in embarrassment.

Neil intervened, “Even we are not going to pay for today’s tea. This is a settlement of our old accounts. You have to take it.”

Gopalbhai still resisted but Neil and Chinu ignored his protests, dropped it in his *galla* (cash drawer) and turned towards the entrance of the college. They looked up at the old structure of the entrance gate and uttered, “Nothing has changed.”

They were happy to be back to their college after four years. Through the gate, they walked straight and turned left from the famous crossroad *Piya Milan Chowk*. The crossroad was named so because several couples hung out over there every evening. From that crossroad, one lane led to the girls’ hostel while the other lane went straight to the boys’ hostel. There was a library adjacent to the other lane that led to the classroom building. They mounted the few steps leading to the library. As expected, it was empty.

“Nothing has changed.”

Then, they went to the canteen and ordered their favourite dish Manchurian. When Chinu ate a piece of it, he couldn’t stop himself from saying, “Wow! *Wahi khushboo wahi taste* (The same aroma and the taste). Nothing has changed.”

After eating their food, they proceeded towards their hostel. Everything seemed familiar to them- the old departmental building, the old laboratory and the road leading to their hostel. They felt that they had become students again. Their own college days flashed before their eyes. Their pace quickened

as adrenaline rushed through their bodies and memories rushed through their minds.

They walked across the mess building and covered their noses.

“*Chheee! Wahi gandi dal-sabji* (Yuck! The same disgusting dal-sabji). Nothing has changed.”

When they reached the hostel building, they sped up on the staircase by climbing two steps up at a time and made their way to their room. It was closed so Neil knocked. However, there was no response. Assuming that the occupant was sleeping, he hammered the door to wake him up. But still, there wasn't any response. Chinu became restless and raised his leg to kick the door but when he heard the movement behind the door, he stopped.

When the door swung open before them, a girl emerged while adjusting her hair. Neil and Chinu were stunned and glanced at each other. A guy appeared behind her and said, “My cousin came here to deliver a package.”

“F\*ck! A girl in the hostel,” Neil gaped and turned to Chinu, “Yaar, this has changed.”

The girl looked down and dashed away.

## 1. Mindbend-Flex Those Neurons

### FOUR YEARS BACK

MindBend, the famous techfest, was being conducted at NIT, Surat. It was the biggest festival of the university. The campus witnessed a congregation of thousands of tech-savvy students, researchers, renowned speakers and eminent personalities from various technical fields. That year, the theme of the event was paying homage to the path-breaking technical expertise of the Harappa civilization. The student community had worked day and night for the last two months to ensure the success of the event. Several informal events, workshops, competitions, speaker sessions, etc., were happening laterally at different locations on the college campus. It was a true amalgamation of science and technology.

However, Neil and Chinu weren't happy. They saw the banner that hung outside the computer lab.

“*Khelkud!* What kind of title is this for a game event?” Chinu asked.

They were third-year students of civil engineering. Neil had shoulder-length hair, like John Abraham of the ‘*Dhoom*’ movie, but he tied it up in a pony while Chinu donned a bandana to hide his terrible haircut.

“Baba has trapped us over here for the past three days. We could have roamed around and enjoyed the greenery.”

It was the last day of the event but they weren't leaving any opportunity to taunt Baba for selecting such a boring title for a video game event. He was christened ‘Baba’ due to his proclivity of discoursing gyaan (knowledge) at every possible instance. He was the most sincere among them. Unlike Neil and Chinu, he was clean-shaven and dressed formally while Neil and Chinu had worn cheap T-shirts flashing the event's logo with khaki shorts.

“This is a techfest, not a cultural event. Not a single girl from the Commerce or Arts College is going to visit. What kind of greenery will you enjoy? Every year, hardly twenty girls take admission in this college. Except one or two, all of them are uglier than Jassi (Ugly Betty) but their attitudes not a bit lesser than Miss India.”

“Okay! I could have been chilling out in my room.”

“I know what you would have been doing. At least be grateful that now you will get something to write in your CV,” Baba said.

Neil intervened, “The CV point of the game event is useless. Not a single company is going to shortlist us based on that.”

“But still it is better than a blank page. You have no idea how tough the competition is for a good placement,” Baba retorted.

“Okay, Babaji, we got your point but no gyaan on that. This is the final round. Can you please go inside and give instructions to the players? I will monitor the event from the cabin area.”

Chinu and Baba entered the main computer room to explain the rules and regulations to the finalists.

Neil settled in the monitor room. They were coordinating the entire event over walkie-talkies. When the players started playing the game, Chinu joined Neil in the cabin. Baba was still in the gaming area to monitor and assist the players. Neil ate a spoonful of Maggi and took out his headphones. Chinu picked up a bag of chips.

“After this event, I am going to freshen up. Hopefully, all the videos have been downloaded,” Chinu said while munching on the chips.

“Yaar, I never get it. How do you download from the blocked sites?”

“Talent, boss, talent!”

“Yeah, yeah. Your talent,” he sneered. “Where does it disappear on the day before an exam?”

“Don’t remind me of that nightmare now. Just tell me, do you want to watch it or not?”

“No, dude! I am exhausted. I need some good sleep. If there is any good stuff, please share it on DC.”

“Of course, dude! *Janseva hi to param dharam hai* (Social work is our prime duty).”

“Yaar, this player has some awesome strategy. I think he will win the game.”

Neil pointed at the player on the computer screen.

“Dany! She will,” Chinu remarked.

“What! *Bandi hai?*”

“Of course! Daenerys Targaryen- the Khaleesi!”

Neil sprang to his feet and rushed to the gaming area. He scanned the room and located her. She was playing passionately. Her eyes were glued to the screen and her fingers hit the keyboard mercilessly.

Neil was stunned.

The memories of the lovely conversation with her and the sunset at Goa flashed in his mind. He recognised the face. It was the same face that drove him crazy for the past four years. He was thrilled to see the face that had changed his life forever. The face responsible for his admission to NIT, Surat. Looking at her brought all those memories back. He was overwhelmed with nostalgia and proceeded to meet her but then he remembered that he hadn't taken a bath for the last four days so he stopped and bolted out of the room.

He took out his bicycle and rode it as fast as he could towards the hostel. When he reached there, he parked it aside without caring to lock it and hurried towards his room. He climbed three steps at a time and ran straight into his room.

He looked around for the charger of an electric razor and shoved it hard into the socket. His phone was ringing all the time but he rushed towards the bathroom. After a quick bath, he returned to his room and rummaged through the heap of supposedly washed clothes for a nice pair of clothes. He picked up Chinu's pair of jeans and sniffed it. It was okay, so he put them on. He checked himself out in the mirror and moved his hands over the patchy beard. He took out the batteries from the plug charger and inserted them into the electric razor. He pressed the button but it didn't start. He hit it on his palms and pressed the button even harder but no luck. He tossed it on the table and scouted for a manual razor in the drawer but had no luck again. He cursed. There was no time so he banged on the door of his neighbour and asked for a manual razor. His neighbour cursed him for waking him up but Neil ignored him. Grabbing the manual razor, he went to the bathroom. After applying soap for foam, he started shaving but cut his chin a bit. He cursed again and



washed his face. He hurried back to his room while tying his long hair in a knot. He put on a T-shirt and sprayed a deodorant generously. He went to the other neighbour and borrowed his shoes and then rushed to the next room to borrow a belt.

He picked up the key of Baba's bike and hung it on his jeans' pocket. While descending the stairs, he tied the belt.

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However, when he reached the computer centre, he found that nobody was there except Chinu.

"*Kaha marwaa raha tha, churan* (Where did you go, f\*cker)?" Chinu blurted out.

"I went to the ATM."

Chinu examined him from head to toe and bellowed, "*Kutte! kis ko chomu bana raha hai* (To whom are you fooling)? The washed clothes, the new belt and the shaven face. I understand everything but nothing is going to happen. Dany went away with the egg."

"Where?"

"How would I know?"

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" Neil was frustrated. "Let's go and find her."

"Dude, why are you being so *despo* (desperate)? Forget her. Come with me. I will show you VS angels."

"Bhai, I need to find her. She is what Kusum is to you."

Kusum was Chinu's ex-girlfriend whom he could not forget and occasionally stalked her on the Facebook. He understood the gravity of the situation.

"Shit!"

Neil nodded.

"Why didn't you bark earlier?"

To hunt her down, Chinu dashed towards the classroom complex (CRC), where the workshops were taking place. The classrooms, which were

sparsely populated during usual days, witnessed an overwhelming crowd due to the presence of eminent personalities. Chinu enquired over there but he came to know that registration was mandatory for the workshops so he deduced that there were minimal chances of finding her there. He left the CRC complex and jogged towards the administrative (admin) building. A start-up conclave was organised on the ground next to the admin building. Chinu entered the conclave and strolled from stall to stall but with no luck.

On the other hand, Neil went to the auditorium where speaker sessions were being organized. He sat on the last seat and surveyed the entire room. However, he didn't find her, so he walked out from the exit gate.

A roar of celebration rose up from the parking space. Neil rushed there in the hope of finding her. The event organisers had transformed the sprawling parking space area for the 'Robowar' competition. There was a testosterone-charged crowd cheering the fight of robots. He was disappointed and kicked a can of Diet Coke which hit the board that showed directions to the '*Drone Attack*' competition, held beside *Piya Milan Chowk*. After the success of the movie '*3 Idiots*', drones had become an integral part of every techfest. Hoping that this event might attract her, he went there and looked around but the Goan girl was nowhere to be seen. Frustration had crept in as he had lost her once before and was repenting that till date. He couldn't afford to lose her again.

After a futile attempt of searching her for over an hour, Neil met Chinu again at the computer centre.

"Did you find her?" Neil asked.

Chinu shrugged his shoulders and said, "Dude, I have searched each and every event. I guess she has left."

"Shit! Shit!" Neil yelled and hit his fist on a tree trunk. It hurt.

"Don't worry, we will find her at any cost. I just heard that some events are happening on the NCC ground too."

"Shall we call Baba to help us find her?" Neil suggested.

Chinu dialled Baba's number.

"Yeah, dude?" Baba responded.

“Baba, Code Red Alert! Meet us immediately at the canteen.”

He cut the call.

“Is she from your school?”

“No.”

“What’s her name?”

“I don’t know.”

“*Kutte!* What do you know then? We paraded for no reason?”

“Of course not.”

“Then, how do you know her?”

“You know my family background. My parents are from IIT Bombay. Met at IIT Bombay, kissed at IIT Bombay and slept together at IIT Bombay. My uncle and aunt met at IIT Madras, kissed at IIT Madras and slept together at Madras. My sister and her live-in partner met at IIT Delhi, kissed at IIT Delhi...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know all that- overachieving family pushing their children towards insanity. Only 98 marks! Where did you lose two marks?”

“You know that my father came to Surat last year. He stayed at this hotel. What is its name?” Neil tapped his head to recall the name of the hotel.

“Hotel Silver Palace?” Chinu suggested.

“No, dude. That is a three-star hotel. He wouldn’t even look at it. I am talking about that five-star hotel. Hotel Diamond...”

“Kohinoor...Hotel Kohinoor...”

“Exactly! He stayed there for five days.” He paused and added, “And would you believe that during those five days that bastard didn’t come to meet me once. He said that stepping inside NIT was an insult to him.”

“I got it. You have daddy issues. But, how is all of this related to Dany?” Chinu asked.

“I am coming to that, dude. You know my family and you know me. On the day of my tenth standard’s result, I was exported to Kota for IIT-JEE

prep. I was slogging hard at Kota. I met Baba over there. After giving JEE, we went to Goa for rejuvenation. Both of us smoked, drank and lay down on the beach. We lost the track of time and money.”

“Cool!”

“But then after a month, the JEE results were announced. I had failed for the second time. Not only IIT but even VIT wasn’t interested in giving me admission.”

“Oh!”

“On top of that, my papa and my uncle started torturing me. I couldn’t take it anymore, so I switched my mobile phone off and made my way to the hilltop to commit suicide.”

“Seriously! I didn’t know that.”

Chinu was shocked.

Neil nodded.

“I am sorry, yaar,” Chinu consoled. He was Neil’s roommate for the last two and half years but Neil had never opened that chapter. Chinu knew that Neil had problems with his father but had no clue that things were this bad. He was flabbergasted.

When will parents understand the confusion of their teenagers? When will they understand that the twelfth standard result is not the only yardstick to gauge one’s calibre?

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### **THREE AND A HALF YEARS BEFORE**

Neil read the signboard ‘*LOVER’S POINT*’ and started climbing the hill. The letter ‘V’ was scratched out and the letter ‘S’ was scribbled over it. It was a tough climb with continuous drizzle and occasional thunderbolts but he made his way to the peak of the hill. The top was relatively flat with a number of uneven boulders scattered around-ideal for couples looking for privacy for a few hours. Many enthusiastic lovers had immortalised themselves by scribbling their names on the boulders. He manoeuvred through the rocks and made his way to the edge of the hill.

A girl with closed eyes and open arms stood there, welcoming the drizzle. Dany. The wind blew slowly and flew the rain droplets away from her face. She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

“Yaar, what a beauty! Just like a VS angel. Droplets on her face shine like pearls. Enchanting flowing hair. Slender waist. Alluring lips. Perfect...”

“Shut up, dude! Shut up! Stop describing her or else a love triangle will be formed here,” Chinu interrupted.

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“Hey! Be careful or you may fall,” Neil warned.

Dany opened her eyes, whirled around and cast a glance at him. His heart skipped a beat.

He regained his bearings and said, “This may be called ‘Lover’s Point’ but many tortured souls have ended their lives here. It is said that their ghosts wander around here. If you stand too close to the edge of the cliff, they might push you down.”

“*Jo apni jaan nahi bacha paaye wo meri jaan kya lenge* (How will those who can’t save themselves kill me)?”

“Irony, right? This may be a lover’s point; however, the highest number of suicides have been committed right here,” he said, edging forward a little.

“The irony is that despite this being one of the most famous places not many people are seen here,” she said and sat on a boulder with the support of her palms and stretched out her legs comfortably.

“Maybe this is because it has been raining heavily since morning else this spot won’t be so deserted. The population of India is so huge that every tourist spot has become like a general coach of a train,” he said while sitting on a rock beside her.

“Exactly! But I don’t understand people. Do they come to enjoy the natural scenery or to take pictures? Will they find such nice weather, such beautiful scenery, such a beautiful ocean view at any other place? It is better to capture it with the eyes than through a lens.”

“Exactly! Where else do you find such a soothing cool breeze and drizzle?” Neil asked while inhaling deeply.

“Absolutely, you can’t. *Goa Goa hai. Iski har adaa mein nasha hai* (Goa is Goa. There is intoxication in its every gesture).”

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“Wait, wait, wait, dude!” Chinu interrupted him, “Did you go there to commit suicide or to report the weather?”

Neil gave a sheepish smile.

“Yaar, the conversation was so enthralling that I couldn’t remember how the sunset turned into the sunrise. That was the best conversation I had in my life.”

“Yeah, yeah! *Ab ladki ki ‘Hello!’ ke saamne hamari bakchodi kahan achchi lagne wali hai* (How are you going to find our gossip enthralling against the ‘Hello’ of a girl!)” Chinu taunted but Neil ignored him and continued with the flashback.

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After chatting with the girl, Neil returned to the hotel. He was in a jolly mood when he stepped into the porch area. He was whistling while he crossed the reception area.

“Sir, you had a call from your mother,” the receptionist informed him.

“Okay.”

Neil whipped out his mobile phone and switched it ON. While climbing the stairs, he dialled her number but it was his father who answered.

“Failure! You are a blot on this IITian family. Disgrace! A painful appendix! A black sheep! No one in our entire family has ever failed in JEE. Are you my child or someone else’s? And what are you doing in Goa? Go to Kota immediately and start your prep...”

Neil cut his call instantly. His father had a superpower of sucking the happiness out of his life.

He went to his room, took out a bottle of whisky and poured it into a glass. The phone call had reminded him what a loser he was. He had slogged hard throughout the year but luck hadn’t favoured him. Was it his fault? He pulled out a bottle of sleeping pills from his bag and emptied it into the glass.

When the glass touched his lips, the doorbell rang.

“Dude, I have ordered some sandwiches and paranthe for us. Please collect the order,” Baba’s voice came from the bathroom.

Neil got up from the sofa and opened the door. A waiter entered with a tray and placed it on the table. He started to leave but when he was at the door, he turned.

“Sahab, do you need soap or shampoo?”

“Thanks, bhaiya. We have them.”

“Sir, anything for laundry?”

“No, thanks.”

Neil was frustrated and wanted him to leave as soon as possible.

“Sir, my shift will be over now. I will be on leave from tomorrow onwards.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, sir. Thanks. If you need anything, please dial 9.”

When the waiter left the room, Neil realised his mistake and put his hand on his head.

“So foolish of me.”

He followed the waiter into the hallway.

“Bhaiya, wait.”

He gave a hundred rupee note and thanked him for his good service during their month-long stay at that hotel. The waiter felt embarrassed but took the note and left with a smile.

Neil returned to his room but was appalled to see Baba holding the empty whisky glass.

“Shit!” Neil exclaimed.

Immediately, he opened the door and bellowed, “Bhaiya! Please come quickly.”

The waiter was about to close the door of the elevator but then stepped out and hurried towards the room.

Baba had stumbled on the sofa and was blinking his eyes unevenly.

“Bhaiya, please get me a taxi *asap*.”

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Neil carried Baba on his back and made his way to the porch quickly. The waiter arranged a three-wheeled tempo that had come to deliver vegetables in the morning. Neil loaded him into the carriage area and sat beside him. He then asked the driver to take them to the nearest hospital. The driver started the vehicle and accelerated. There were no other vehicles on the road which allowed him to drive faster. Neil was panting. Baba meant everything to him- he was a friend, a brother and a guide bundled into one. He couldn't afford to lose him. Saliva was drooling out from Baba's mouth. He was in a semi-conscious state.

To reach the hospital, the driver took a shortcut and drove into a narrow lane of Goa. The road was uneven, crooked and laden with gravel, but the driver wasn't slowing down. A few stones hit the tempo and its engine sputtered and stopped. Why did bad things have to happen during an emergency? Neil was scared. They were deserted on an under-construction road. He breathed unevenly. Fat tears oozed out of the corners of his eyes. His stupidity should not cost his friend his life. He quickly jumped out of the tempo and looked for other vehicles.

It was morning and Goa hadn't woken up yet. A car came but it zoomed past without responding to his gestures. A milkman came but was of no help as he was riding a bicycle. Neil was frustrated and worried. Every minute was critical. He let out a wail of despair. But then, an Activa appeared in the distance, approaching them. He made up his mind to take the lift at any cost so when it was a few feet away from him, he jumped onto the middle of the road. The rider was flabbergasted and applied brakes. It skidded a bit before stopping. He breathed a sigh of relief on seeing the driver. It was the girl he had met at the Lover's Point.

“Hey! My friend has swallowed sleeping pills and our tempo has broken down. Please take us to the nearest hospital.”



Without waiting for her response, Neil laid Baba on her bike and then sat behind him to support. She started the Aactiva. They wandered around in search of a hospital but couldn't find any. Neil grew impatient. Ten minutes later, they discovered a veterinary clinic. It wasn't the best option but they didn't have any choice. Neil got down from the Aactiva, carried Baba on his back and hurried towards the door.

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The veterinarian was playing a video game when he heard a knock on the door. He was irritated but leapt to his feet.

"Sir, please help us. He has swallowed sleeping pills. Please..." Neil pleaded.

The vet guided them into the clinic and asked him to lay down Baba on the examination table. Then, the vet pushed his fingers into Baba's mouth to elicit the gag reflex. Neil felt foolish for not knowing this. Baba started vomiting. Then the vet pushed a pipe of a funnel in his mouth and poured water into it. When the water brimmed to his mouth, he pulled out the pipe and made Baba vomit again. After repeating it twice, when the vet was confident that all the pills were vomited out, he gave him an injection.

"Did he lose a large sum of money in gambling or did he fail in exams? Did a girl leave him or did his father scold him? What happened to this stupid boy?" asked the vet.

Neil and the girl glanced at each other and were about to say something but the vet interjected, "Don't! I don't want to hear any of your stupid excuses. Suicide has become fashionable nowadays. A Low EQ generation. Never think about anyone else and choose the easiest option- ending life. Don't have the guts to face a situation like a true man. For God's sake, life is not a video game where you get numerous chances. You have only one chance to live. Learn to value your life. Don't throw it away like an idiot."

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When Neil finished narrating the Goa incident, Chinu gazed at him silently. He had never thought that Neil had such a terrible past. He had always believed that Neil was lucky to be born in a family of IITians but for the first time, he realised the pressure of having over-achievers as parents. Though their college was ranked among the top twenty-five colleges in India,

it wasn't enough for his parents. The expectation for excellence had cast a large shadow over him. Mediocrity was never an option. Not getting into IIT was considered a failure in their eyes.

"If I hadn't met her on that day then I might have ended my life. That incident made me realise my mistake. I worked very hard the next year. Though I didn't get into IIT, my score was enough to land me in NIT Surat. My father was disappointed but I didn't give a damn..."

"Dude, dude! Enough of your daddy issues. Tell me, what happened after the veterinarian taunted you for attempting suicide?"

"Yaar, he wrote me a prescription so I went out to buy medicine. But when I returned the girl had already vanished. I looked around but couldn't find her."

"Dude, this story can't end like this. We will definitely find her."

They headed towards the canteen. On the way, outside the library, Baba met them.

"Code Red Alert? What happened?" He asked.

"He found that Goan girl," Chinu said.

"Who?"

"Arey, the girl who took you to the vet."

"What vet?"

"Nothing, Baba!" Neil intervened.

"Arey, Baba, how can you forget her? She took you to the vet when you swallowed sleeping pills."

Baba flexed his neurons and recalled the same incident. Neil took few steps backwards.

"*Kaminey*, you said that it was a case of food poisoning," Baba blurted out angrily. Neil quickened his steps and ran. Baba chased him. Neil made his way through the crowd at the event stalls towards the mechanical department building and ran towards the canteen. Baba was furious. He took off a floater and aimed at him but Neil ducked.

Baba took off the other floater and chased him. Neil cursed him and hid behind a bike parked outside the canteen. It wasn't the best location to hide and soon Baba located him. Neil was scared so he ran from there.

Baba threw another floater at him but instead of hitting him, it hit a guy who was eating a grilled sandwich. Neil disappeared instantly. Baba too hid behind a car. The guy got up furiously and looked around but couldn't track down the source of the floater in the crowd. Neil surreptitiously walked to the counter and pretended to order something. From the corner of his eyes, he glanced at the guy. A girl, who sat beside him, asked him to forget and sit. Neil's eyes opened wide as he recognised her.

Baba and Chinu appeared before him.

"Baba, let's settle this fight at night," Neil suggested.

"No, *kaminey*! I am not going to spare you. How dare you take me to a vet?"

"Bhai, I will let you kick as many GPL as you want but spare me now."

"*Haraami*, I will kick you so hard on your bums that no painkillers will help you," Baba paused then continued, "Shit! Wait! You mean, were you? Were you going to drink that whiskey?" He put his hands on his temples. "Were you attempting a suicide that day?"

Neil nodded.

"Shit, yaar!" Baba paused and then continued, "Shit, shit, shit! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Can we enact this emotional drama later? The Goan girl is important right now," Chinu suggested.

"Where is she?" Baba asked.

"That girl," Neil pointed at the girl holding a trophy. She sat with her friend and the guy whom Baba had just hit with his floater.

"Forget her," Baba suggested.

"Why? What happened?"

"Yaar, do you see the guy who is with her? He is my arch-enemy. I

made him run naked from the TV room to the hostel gate in the first year.”

“But, how could you rag him? He is your batch-mate, right?”

“Yeah, but he took admission in the third round. By that time, fifteen days had already passed. I pretended to be his senior so that I could rag him.”

“Nice!” Chinu exclaimed.

Neil glared at Baba, “I thought you were a sincere and nice guy.”

“It happened in the euphoria of joining a college.”

“Our friendship is over now and at this moment,” Neil said and walked towards Dany but she and her friend had stood up and prepared to leave for their cab.

The guy standing next to her frowned at Baba and Neil. However, when Dany saw Neil, she waved at him.

“I guess I know you,” she said.

“Sorry?” Neil said.

“The ghost from Goa. How can the one who can’t save herself murder others?”

“Of course, of course! I am sorry.”

Baba and Chinu gave weird glances to each other. Neil’s acting was incredible. A few minutes ago, he was desperate but now he was acting all so cool. He feigned ignorance.

Her friends started walking towards the cab but she stayed back.

“Avani Somani,” she introduced herself by extending her hand.

“Hi! I am Neilabh Desai,” he responded by shaking her hand.

“Do you study here?”

“Yeah, but I have never seen you here.”

The ragged guy gestured her towards the cab.

“I am sorry. This is my friend-Pia and this is her cousin-Arun.”

Arun gave a scornful smile and turned to Avani, “We have to leave.”

However, Neil ignored him as he didn't want to end the conversation.

"I was the organiser of this competition," he said while pointing at the trophy.

"And I am the winner of this competition," she said, stepping towards the car.

"Congrats!"

"BJP...", she realised that she had cracked a bad joke and immediately rectified, "Delete, delete! Very bad joke."

"It's okay. I could crack a worse joke than this."

Her friend Pia interrupted, "Avani, I am sorry but we must leave now. I don't want to travel in a general coach again."

"I am sorry, Neil, but we have to leave."

"Okay, bye."

"See you then."

She sat next to Pia and left. Neil kept on gazing till the cab disappeared from his sight. Chinu and Baba hurried towards him.

"So, had a nice chat?" Chinu asked.

"Shit! I forgot to take her number," Neil said.

"Don't worry, she will be on Facebook."

## 2. Stalker-Leecher Trophy

Neil dug out Avani's profile on Facebook. He cursed himself for not searching her hard enough as she was at the third FB connection. He was floored as soon as he saw her picture. Her smiling face drove him crazy once again. Not a bit had changed. The same heavenly beauty. Those mesmerising eyes. It took away his breath again. His heart beat faster. The mobile screen was small so he switched to the laptop screen. Even that screen seemed small to him. Usually, he wouldn't stalk anyone but he spent the entire day knowing more about her.

In the evening, when he met Chinu at Gopalbhai's tapri for a cup of tea, Chinu asked, "Did she accept your friend request?"

"I am not like you, who send a friend request to each and every girl. I don't want to pile on."

"F\*ck you!" Chinu cursed.

"F\*ck you!" Neil responded.

Chinu finished his tea silently. While returning to the hostel, he again touched the topic.

"Then, what's your plan?"

"Barney's three-day rule: I will wait for three days before making any move."

"You are chickening out."

"No, I am not."

-----τβπ-----

On the fourth day, when Chinu and Neil were heading towards their class, Chinu enquired, "So, what did she say?"

"I haven't sent the request yet."

"Are you mad?"

"*Phat rahi hai meri* (I am scared). What will I do if she rejects my friend request?"

“I told you.”

“She will know that I have been going through her profile for the past three days but have sent the friend request on the fourth day.”

“You are stupid. Don’t overthink. Just send the damn friend request. I am sure that she will accept it. If not, then find someone else.”

-----τβπ-----

The next day, Baba, as per his usual routine, came to his room with *agarbatti* (incense sticks) and circled them around the photos. Neil had replaced all the pictures of Gods with Avani’s photos. Chinu and Neil giggled while packing their bag for the class. When Baba realised his folly, he gritted his teeth while murmuring Sanskrit chants.

While attending classes, Chinu drew the picture of the professor as Dracula sucking the blood out from the students’ heads. Neil was busy checking out Avani’s photos. His mobile’s wallpaper was changed to her picture- she was on a swing, donning a grin.

-----τβπ-----

A week later, while playing table tennis, Baba served a ball to Neil and asked, “Her favourite movie?”

“*Jab We Met*,” Neil responded.

“Her favourite song?”

“*Yeh Doorian* from ‘*Love Aaj Kal*’.”

“Her favourite game?”

“*Prince of Persia*,” Neil said while hitting a killer shot to score the point.

“Very good, very good! You have done a great deal of research on her.”

“Not only on her but also on her best friend Pia.”

Chinu entered the gaming area.

“Who is Pia? What happened to Avani?” Chinu asked.

“Pia is Avani’s friend. They had 17 conversations on Facebook. Most of them related to history and chemistry. Avani’s favourite scientist is Marie Curie.”

“*Marie Curie isliye mari kyun ki nahi kar paayi khud ki curing* (Marie Curie died because she couldn’t cure herself),” Baba said while passing a ball to Neil.

Chinu and Neil shook their heads dismissively at his lame joke.

“What? It’s a good joke,” Baba defended.

“Anyway, currently, it will take me 13 hours 55 minutes to reach her house by car. On Facebook, she has posted 77 posts and uploaded 53 pictures till now. She has liked 421 posts and 135 photos and commented on 267 messages. On studying all data points, she seems intelligent, self-motivated, cool and progressive in her thinking.”

“By God! If you had done this much research on our project, we wouldn’t have received a C grade,” Chinu said sarcastically.

“Now, I can truly proclaim that you too are a true stalker like Chinu.”

“Not a stalker but a true lover,” Neil said and served the ball to Baba.

-----τβπ-----

“If we are going to listen to Taylor Swift then I am no longer playing the game,” Baba said when they were playing ‘*Enemy Hunt*’, a multiplayer game by AOL Games, with the enemy hostel on LAN network.

Neil switched the song to *Yeh Dooriyan*. Baba gave an exasperated look.

“If you can’t listen to this song, then you are most welcome to leave.”

“I like *Yeh Dooriyan*,” Baba said in a low tone.

They resumed playing the game.

Later, in the game, Chinu was trapped by the enemy hostel and sought help from Neil. But he didn’t listen to him. Chinu raised his voice again. Neil was jolted out of his dreamy reverie and went to help him but they had lost the game by then. Chinu snarled at him for not using a laser shield. Neil made an excuse that he didn’t know how to use the laser shield. Chinu stood up to



show him but then he saw the minimized window and lost his temper.

“*Lukkhe*, this is the limit. Baba, he was salivating over the photos of Dany.”

“I wasn’t,” Neil defended.

“Baba, where is that ‘Stalker-Leecher’ trophy? He deserves it more than I do.”

Baba picked up the trophy from the table and threw it at Neil. He caught it and set it aside. Meanwhile, Chinu snatched away his laptop and handed it to Baba.

“Baba, we will end this *nautanki* (drama) right now,” Neil tried to get hold of his laptop but Chinu restrained him. “Send the friend request to Avani. I am holding him here.”

Baba opened her FB page and hovered the mouse pointer over the ‘FRIEND REQUEST’ icon. Neil was struggling to be free from Chinu’s grasp.

“Shall I click the friend request icon?” Baba teased. “Shall I? Shall I?”

“Baba, please don’t. You are my best friend, right? Baba, please don’t,” Neil pleaded as he struggled hard to free himself.

“Baba, I am saying- Do it!” Chinu ordered. “Do it.”

But Neil pushed harder and got out of his grip but tripped on Baba who accidentally pressed the button.

Neil stood stupefied before them.

“What did you do, *churan*!”

“I am sorry, man,” Baba apologized.

“Are you stupid?”

“We were just messing with you.”

“*Kaminey*, what will I do now? She will think I am *despo*.”

“*Despo*- I doubt! But *phattu*- definitely! You should have done this a long time ago,” Chinu taunted.

“Don’t utter a word. I don’t want to talk to either of you. You have ruined my first impression.”

“Dude, stop being such a drama-queen,” Chinu said.

“You won’t understand this. This is not one of your flings.”

“You are over-reacting, dude,” Baba said.

“I don’t want to talk to you guys. Get out of this room.”

“This is my room, too,” Chinu said.

“Fine, then I will step out.”

“You better,” Chinu replied scornfully.

-----τβπ-----

The next morning, as he was applying face-wash onto his face, the phone chimed. He opened his eyes hurriedly and whipped out his phone. The foam didn’t hurt his eyes but the spam message did.

In the class, he was checking his phone for any Facebook notifications. He was frustrated and desperate for her response.

In the mess, he spun his spoon in the rice plate. His mind was occupied with thoughts about her. He left the plate uneaten and went back to his room.

In the room, Chinu pulled out the adapter of his mobile phone charger from the plug point and plugged in the wire for a hot water rod.

“Why did you pull out the adapter?”

“I need to take a hot water bath.”

“What’s so urgent? You took a bath last week.”

“I did but I have to attend an interview round for summer internship. Why don’t you recharge your mobile using the laptop?”

“Dude, it will take eons to charge through a laptop. I have practical classes to attend.”

“Why don’t you stop staring at the mobile now and then? She is not going to accept your friend request,” Chinu mocked.

“I hope the interviewer rapes you ruthlessly.”

Chinu threw a practical journal at him.

-----τβπ-----

Neil opened his journal in the laboratory and kept it on the table. One of the group members was busy conducting the practical. Neil kept on looking at his mobile phone often. The lab coordinator caught him, confiscated his phone and asked him to collect it later.

In the evening, Neil stormed into Baba’s room.

“Baba, she has not yet accepted my friend request.”

Baba was busy adjusting strings on his guitar. Though he didn’t know anything except a few notes of the ‘Happy Birthday’ tune, he acted like a pro.

Neil’s entry broke his meditation, so he yelled at him, “*Churan*, it has not even been a day. Have some patience.”

-----τβπ-----

At night, when Neil was glass-tracing diagrams, his mobile phone beeped. He quickly pounced on it but was disappointed. He vented out his frustration by throwing it on his bed. Chinu and Baba let out a high-pitched giggle.

The next morning, Chinu sent a blank message. Neil jolted out of his bed and checked his mobile phone.

“*Dekho, dekho, Baba. Ek jamana tha jab chomu ke alarm se pura hostel jag jaata tha, lekin launde ki aankein nahi jhapakti thi aur aaj dekho ek ping se kaise khada ho gaya* (Just see, Baba, once upon a time, the alarm of this bastard used to wake up the entire hostel but he wouldn’t even budge and now a ping has jolted him out of his sleep).”

Neil threw the alarm clock at him.

-----τβπ-----

While coming out of the class, Chinu scanned the noticeboard. There was a notice for the industrial visit to Jodhpur to study rocks and the architecture of forts.

“An industrial visit to Jodhpur? *Inko Jaipur plan karne mein khujli ho*

*rahi thi kya* (Was it itching them to plan for Jaipur instead)?” Neil ranted.

But Chinu’s eyes were glued to the notice for the next week quiz.

“Can somebody give them an itch guard? Not even fifteen days have passed but it started itching them to conduct a quiz.”

-----τβπ-----

It was too much for Neil. He had waited a week for her response. His desperation had peaked up.

“I am going to Jaipur,” Neil announced and sprang to his feet.

“Are you stupid? If you show your desperation, then you are doomed,” Baba said and rolled his spoon to mix noodles with schetzwan sauce.

“How would she know that I am *despo*?”

His phone vibrated. He opened it to read. Chinu had again sent a spam: This joke is never getting old;-P.

“*Bachche*, a hot girl can sniff desperation from a far distance,” Baba said and stuffed his mouth full.

“What do you mean?”

“How many friends does she have on her friend list? 250? 300?”

“273!”

His phone beeped again but he wasn’t going to fall for Chinu’s trick again.

“Why so less? Such a girl must be receiving a truckload of friend requests. Then how come she only has 273 friends on her friend list?”

“Tell me, what should I do so that she will accept my friend request?” Neil asked and sat down on the chair. For the first time, he was interested in Baba’s gyaan (knowledge).

“Forget her, dude. Nothing is going to happen. She has ignored you. These beautiful girls only know how to play with the hearts of innocent boys like us,” Baba spoke with bitterness. Neil was wrong. Baba’s gyaan would never be interesting. Baba continued, “We don’t need these bitches. Why are you giving so much importance to them? Life doesn’t start or end at their

feet. It's more than that. This is just a phase. It will pass. Let me give you an example. A child, an adult and an oldie were watching an ad of a beautiful lady eating pink coloured yoghurt. Do you know, what was going in each of their minds? The child thought that the yoghurt must be yummy. The adult was aroused by the ravishing beauty of the model. But the most interesting thought played in the mind of the oldie. You know what?"

"Huh?" Neil was lost in his own thoughts.

"This yoghurt seems soft, I think this will be good for my bowel movement."

Neil forced a smile. Baba continued, "Don't you see? The priorities change over time. You may be attracted to her now but over time, you will lose interest. So, stop brooding over her. Let me give you another example. In childhood, you learned summation and multiplication and you enjoyed a lot doing it, didn't you? However, when you discovered the world of derivative and integration, do you find multiplication exciting?"

Baba shook him to bring him back.

"If I say, do the multiplication of 364 and 115. Will you do it?" Baba suggested. Neil did a mental calculation and uttered, "41460."

"What?" Baba exclaimed. He couldn't believe that Neil had calculated so fast so he picked up the phone and unlocked it to check the answer.

A Facebook notification appeared on the screen- *Avani Somani accepted your friend request. Write on Avani's timeline.*

"Neil, she has accepted your friend request."

"What!" Neil exclaimed and snatched his phone. "Show me!"

"Baba! This is amazing!" Neil squealed with joy and embraced him briefly. He felt elated and danced a little in joy, grabbing Baba's shoulders.

"I can't believe she accepted my request," he said and strategically dragged him out.

"I can't believe that either."

Baba was puzzled and didn't know how to react.

“But, she did. I am so happy,” Neil said and dragged him out of the room.

“Why are you pushing me out?”

“Baba, try to understand. I need some privacy.”

Neil shut the door in his face.

“*Saale, ladki mili to dost ko bhul gaya* (Rascal, you forget your friend the moment a girl responds).”

Neil opened the door a bit, peeped out and shook his head with a wicked smile.

Baba kicked the door but Neil slammed it shut.

“I will see you,” Baba said, hitting the door again.

Neil typed the message.

Neil: *Hi!*

Avani: *Hello! How are you?*

Neil: *I am fine. So, you reached comfortably?*

Avani: *Yeah! ☺*

Neil: *If you had stayed a little longer, I would have shown you the beautiful Surat city.*

Avani: *Actually, I was at your college for four days.*

“F\*ck Baba,” Neil cursed and then typed.

Neil: *I hope you enjoyed your time at my college.*

Avani: *Yeah, a very good campus. After all, it is NIT.*

Neil: *Haan, phir bhi IIT wale sautela vyavhaar karte hai* (But still, IITians look at us condescendingly).

Avani: *You know, I too wanted to be an engineer but papa didn't allow me to choose Maths. But all is good now. I am doing a major in chemistry.*

As if Neil didn't know about it but he was smart. He went along and feigned surprise.

Neil: *Chemistry, good! Mere to kabhi palle hi nahi padi. Do saal isne JEE mein taang adayi thi (I never understood chemistry. It bothered me for two years in JEE exams).*

Avani: *I love chemistry. In fact, I am planning to do MS.*

Neil: *MS?*

Avani: *Master of Science. I am going to the US. I have already cleared GRE exams and have received offers from two universities. I am just waiting for the submission of one project and the final year exams.*

Neil yelled, “Damnit!” but controlled his emotions and typed.

Neil: *Good! Congrats!*

-----τβπ-----

A roar of laughter erupted on the terrace of a haunted building. Baba gestured them to lower their voices.

“*Baba, isko to daaru peene se pehele hi ulti ho gai* (Baba, he threw up even before drinking alcohol),” Chinu quipped and took a sip from his glass.

Neil threw a floater at him.

“What happened?” Baba asked.

Whenever they planned their liquor party, they came to this haunted building. A few years ago, there had been a rumour that the building was haunted. The first family that came to live there was murdered. The next family that came after them had hallucinations of ghosts. They left the night they had shifted and didn’t even return to collect their belongings.

It had become an ideal hangout place for their *daaru* party. Since alcohol was banned in Gujarat and illegal alcohol was costlier and inferior in quality, they distilled their own alcohol on the terrace of this building. All they needed was sugar, water, a packet of yeast and active carbon for fermentation. The process of alcohol preparation was simple: a week of fermentation followed by the process of distillation. The necessary equipment was designed in the college laboratory to aid the process. After distillation, they mixed the liquor with juice or cold-drink to improve its flavour.

Chinu took a sip of freshly made liquor and said, “Dany is going to the

US for Masters. Then, she will pursue her PhD too and most probably will work over there only. And look at our good friend! He is struggling through the college. *Teen mein KT lekar baitha hai. Iska to KLPD ho gaya* (He is reappearing in the exams for three subjects. He is doomed).”

Neil threw another floater at him. Chinu picked up his floaters, wore them and strode out.

“Don’t worry, you will find someone better than her,” Baba said while offering a hookah pipe to him.



### 3. Rimjhim Gire Saawan

Neil was watching the '*FRIENDS*' series on his laptop when Chinu entered and started chanting, "*Gota gas pe! Gota gas pe! Gota gas pe* (I am screwed)!"

"What happened?" Neil said and pressed the spacebar to pause the video.

"*Kutte*, have you forgotten that we have a quiz tomorrow?"

"Shit! Shit! I am screwed. I haven't read a word," Neil blurted out and rose to his feet.

"I have heard that Chaatu will be taking an extra class at 10."

Neil heaved a sigh of relief on hearing about Chaatu (the one who licks off books before the exam) and sat back in his chair. Then, he looked at the screen of his laptop to check the time.

"It's 9:45. We still have 15 minutes."

"Let's go to Gopalbhai's tapri for some fresh air," Chinu suggested.

"I want to finish off this episode. Why don't we meet at Chaatu's room?"

"Cool!" Chinu said and left.

Before Neil could press the spacebar button to resume the video, he heard a ping of a game request notification.

"I don't understand. How could these blood sucking leeches send game requests even after being blocked? *Aatank hai* (It's terror)."

Neil minimized the screen and clicked the notification bar. However, his annoyed face turned cheerful when he saw that the game request was from Avani. She was still online. He accepted the game request and started playing it against her. She wasn't a bad player; after all, she had won the competition against the best players of the campus. At 10 pm, Chinu called him but he rejected the call and dropped a message that he would be a bit late.

After playing for an hour with her, he realised that he had had enough

fun and he should be studying now. So, he logged out of the game and went to the bathroom to freshen up.

When he returned to his room, he muttered, “*Ab to bhai phodnewala hai kal ki quiz mein* (I will crack the quiz tomorrow).”

His mobile tinkled then. The message was from Avani.

He read it: *Interested in losing one more game?*

He looked at the time and counted the number of hours left for the quiz.

“I still have ten hours to go for a quiz on two chapters. Three hours per chapter and three hours of sleep. I can easily spare one hour for this. Set!” he thought.

He replied: *Come online.*

They resumed playing the game. He was so engrossed in playing the game that he didn’t realise when three hours of sleep reduced to two hours to nil. When Chinu barged into the room, he started yelling, “*Saale, kaha marwa raha tha? Aaya kyun nahi* (Bastard, why didn’t you come for the prep)?”

“Thank God! You are here. Please save me. I haven’t read a word. I am screwed!”

“Why? What happened?” Chinu asked. His eyes turned to the screen and he read the name of the opponent- *Dany*.

“*Lukkhe*, she gave a clear signal to you that she is not interested in you. Then, why are you stalking her?”

“I had stopped following her but then she sent me a game request and I couldn’t control myself,” Neil uttered but soon regretted speaking those words.

“Game request!” Chinu exclaimed. “*Haraamzaade*, whenever I send you a game request, you act like an angry young man but when Dany sent the request, you became Devanand! Why don’t you hang yourself?”

“Bhai, I agree I am the culprit here. You have all the right to yell at me but please do it after the quiz. Right now, I am stressed out. Please teach me something.”

“I am not going to teach you anything.”

“*Phati padi hai meri, yaar* (I am screwed, dude). I haven’t read a word,” Neil pleaded.

“Why didn’t you come then?”

“Bhai, I will give you a treat this Sunday.”

“No, dude! I need to complete my sleep quota.”

“Bhai, I will fail if you don’t teach me.”

“You should have thought about that before accepting the game request.”

“I know I have committed a big blunder but I couldn’t stop myself when she sent me a request. What would you have done if Kusum had sent you such request? Please teach me,” Neil begged by folding his hands and added, “*Kusum ki Kasam*.”

“*Kaminey*, that’s not fair. You can’t swear on her every now and then.”

Neil gave a wicked smile.

Chinu pulled out a book from his bag and opened it. Neil closed his laptop and settled in the chair before him. Chinu drew a diagram but before he could utter a word, Neil’s phone buzzed. Chinu read the name of the caller: *Dany*.

“If you pick up this call, I am not going to teach you anything,” he was exasperated by then. Neil murmured ‘*sorry*’ and gestured with his fingers that he would be back in five minutes only, while sauntering out of his room.

-----τβπ-----

“Hello!” Neil said.

“What is that chant in Gujju? Yeah! I remember- *Haarela jeevda khai jeetela chevda khai. Haarela jeevda khai jeetela chevda khai*.”

“Okay, okay, I admit that you are good at playing games. From where did you learn to play it so well?” Neil asked while walking leisurely in the corridor.

Avani settled in a laidback position on a chair.

“My brother is a game freak. We used to play these kinds of games a lot. I have learnt everything from him. You should see him when he plays. He gets very aggressive. You have to match up to his level to respond. We played a lot and fought a lot. At that time, I hated him very much but when he went to IIT Kharagpur, I was the one who cried the most.”

“IIT Kharagpur?” Neil stopped as he was a bit uncomfortable hearing the word ‘IIT’. He couldn’t understand when the ghost of IIT would leave him.

“Yeah, but he shifted to Silicon Valley last year. I hope you have heard about AOL Games?”

“Who hasn’t! I am a big fan of ‘*Enemy Hunt*’ and ‘*Tornado*’. I have heard that they are working on ‘*Alien Attack*’,” Neil said while marching out of the hostel onto the road of the campus.

Avani leapt to her feet and started strolling around.

“Yeah, it’s awesome. Bhaiya was telling me that it has ‘never seen before’ kind of animation and special effects. They have literally put their imagination on the screen. It’s so amazing how a handful of college students built such a big company that pushes boundaries every time. I guess that is called passion. And look at our start-up culture.”

She picked up her dirty clothes.

“Exactly, *glorified kiranewale and taxiwale* (glorified shopkeepers and taxi-drivers)!” Neil quipped.

“If you want to start a company, then work like Elon Musk. Mars colony, Tesla car, solar plant...*Banda phod raha hai* (That guy is hitting bullseyes every time). What a passion! He will definitely put humans on Mars. The car industry is up for a major breakthrough. Nobody can stop him from leading the world towards the direction of solar energy.”

“You know if humans wish to solve the solar power problem then they can accomplish it within two years but mercenaries with vested interests are not letting it happen. It seems absurd that money plays a crucial role in taking forward any technology. The green paper has the power to change the destiny of the human race.”

“I am appalled at the mentality of Indian society. Why is being rich so looked down upon?” she said while throwing the dirty clothes in the washing machine.

“Because India had witnessed the cruel history of landlords looting poor farmers. Watch ‘*Mother India*’.”

“Agreed,” she nodded.

Neil drank filtered water from a tap of a cooler and gazed at the admin building.

“These Bollywood masala movies have spoilt me. I thought that I would have full-on fun in the college. But all my dreams were shattered after coming here. *SOTY* has spoiled me.”

“It was high-school.”

She was working in the terrace garden by then. She cut a few branches of a rose plant and then started sprinkling water over the plants.

“What the hell! High school! Kill me! Who drives sports cars to high school? Who wears designer clothes to high school? Here, more than 70 % of the students come to classes without taking bath. *F\*ck KCho F\*ck*.”

“Don’t, he will enjoy it.”

“What?”

“You heard it!”

Neil’s face split in a wide smile.

“You know, there is a guy in my class who doesn’t understand double meaning words. *Aisa machaata hai naa*. Hilarious!” Neil started strolling around the campus again as he continued, “Once he uploaded his photos with his parents on FB but you know, what the caption was?”

“What?”

“Awesome Threesome!”

“What!”

Neil continued, “Once, he was drenched in the rain. He updated on his

wall: I like getting wet. Last month, he went to the church with his brother and updated: *Enjoyed a lot in a missionary position with my brother.*”

“Really?”

“Destiny has a weird way of playing games.”

“Why?”

“You won’t believe me if I tell you his roll number.”

“What is it? Thirteen? Seven?”

“69.”

“69! I can’t believe this,” Avani guffawed, “*Kaun hai yeh namuna* (Who the hell is this guy)?”

“Biswajeet.”

“You mean BJ.”

They burst into laughter.

Neil had forgotten that Chinu was waiting for him. While strolling around the campus, he reached *Piya Milan Chowk*. A guy was climbing over the wall of the girl’s hostel. He thought of shouting but then he chose to ignore it.

“You should watch ‘*Gunda*’-the most under-appreciated movie of the century,” Neil suggested.

*“Mera naam hai Ibu Hatela,  
Maa meri chudail ki beti,  
Baap mera shaitan ka chela.  
Khayega kela?”*

“Oh! You have seen the movie,” Neil exclaimed as he sat on the swing, installed in the small park of the campus. He pushed himself on the swing and started gliding through the air. He was thrilled to have a conversation with her. He recalled the night at the hilltop at Goa. The same feeling was ignited in him again. It didn’t matter what they were discussing but he was enchanted. The topics of conversation kept on changing but her sweet voice kept ringing in his ears.

“If you understand the viewpoint of a militant, you will find him a warrior,” she said while arranging her books on the rack. They were on Hitler, Gandhi, Mandela and Che Guevara.

“Just as the nuclear holocaust in Japan is justified now if Hitler had won the World War, the genocide of Jews would have been justified ethically,” Neil said while striding on the road leading to the night canteen.

“Exactly!”

She carried a bucket full of washed clothes to the balcony. Earphones were plugged in her ear. She twisted her washed kurti to drain water and hung it on a rope.

He was at the night canteen. A plate full of Maggi was served at his table. He took a spoonful of it and savoured the taste.

“Maggi should be declared as the National Food of India! I love it.”

Avani was playing with her cat.

“I love cats.”

“I hate dogs,” Neil said when he was peeing on the wall of the campus and dogs started barking at him. He ran while zipping his pants. Dogs chased him. He climbed the tree adjacent to the wall of the campus and jumped on the other side of the wall. She was laughing madly at his adventure. He trudged along the road and reached the gate of the college.

“JEE prep has corrupted me. My mind looks for complexity in simple questions.”

He woke up the guard and asked for a charger.

“I am fascinated by games. There is an entire world in it. Sometimes, life seems like a complicated game.”

She was rummaging through the fridge for some food. She picked up a bowl of rasgulla but then switched to a low-fat vanilla ice cream.

“I am fascinated by chemistry.

White is sugar,

White is salt,

But both taste different.

Even the same element behaves differently: one is blackish grey and soft but if pressurised, it rearranges itself to give the hardest crystal.

The same numbers of carbon, hydrogen and oxygen atoms connect in different fashions to give fructose, glucose and sucrose.

Neil had plugged his phone. He closed his eyes and listened to her sweet voice.

Avani continued, “When electrons jump from a higher level to a lower one, it emits light but if it moves randomly, it gives heat.

One semiconductor carbon is life while the other is on the way to become a life.

“Wow, you are very passionate about chemistry.”

“I hope Papa understands that too. I have cleared my GRE and have offer letters from four universities. But I don’t have the courage to ask for his permission. I am afraid of his rejection. He loves me very much.”

Neil strode over to the hostel.

“Love should never suffocate one. It should give freedom to dream and act. People often confuse love with attachment. If it’s good for your life, your father will understand and set you free. Don’t worry. Just tell him. *Waise bhi panchi ko aashiyana chhod ke pardes jaana hi padta hai* (Anyway, a bird has to leave its nest for a foreign land during spring).”

“You are right. *Udenge nahi to chaand tak pahuchenge kaise* (How can one reach the moon if he doesn’t dare to fly high)?” Avani said while gazing at the moon.

“Agreed.”

They were again lost in their conversation. She made him listen to her favourite music by putting her phone near the speaker. They danced a bit and then laughed some more. They never realised when their conversation led to the sunrise.

“Thanks to you, I am witnessing the sunrise after I don’t know how many years.”



“Listen, I have to go to my dance class.”

“No problem. Good night. Sorry, good morning.”

Neil returned to his room and found Chinu sleeping like a baby. He switched off the light and curled up in the double-bed beside Chinu.

Later, at 8 am, when Chinu woke up, he found himself in a weird embracing position. Neil had shifted to his part of the double-bed, clung to him tightly and was pouting. Chinu felt disgusted to be in that position and got up quickly. He tapped Neil but he didn't flutter. Then, he kicked him but Neil was still struggling to wake up. As a last resort, Chinu put a dirty sock near his nose. Neil jumped from his bed and bellowed, “*Haraamzaade, gala hi kyun nahi daba deta* (Why don't you strangle me instead)!”

“*Kaminey*, we are getting late for the quiz.”

Neil checked his phone and got nervous, “*Gota gas pe!* I am screwed, dude. Only an hour to the quiz. I haven't read a word.”

“How was the phone sex?” Chinu retorted.

“Dude, stop messing with me now and teach me something.”

Neil opened his book. Chinu would have annoyed him more but there wasn't enough time so he taught him enough *fundas* to pass the quiz.

-----τβπ-----

In the evening, they were gawking at the noticeboard.

“How's this possible? How can you score more than me? You learnt from me,” Chinu ranted.

“I don't know.”

“Get lost! I am not talking to you,” Chinu said and left.

Neil received a message from Avani mentioning that her father had agreed for her post-graduation. For a moment, he had mixed emotions. Though he was happy that his advice had worked, it meant that she was definitely leaving India. Nevertheless, he put those thoughts aside and dialled her number.

#### 4. Engineerzoned

“Chinu...”

“What? What? What did you say?”

Neil realised his mistake and corrected it immediately, “Chandrakant... He is my best friend. My confidant. He fights with me. He gets upset with me. But still, he can’t live without me.”

-----τβπ-----

At their hostel room, Chinu begged him, “Dude, please open the FB. Kusum has uploaded a new picture.”

“Why don’t you check out using your profile?”

“Dude, she has blocked me again.”

“Why don’t you create a new account and send a friend request? You have done it numerous times.”

Chinu made weird faces as he said, “She has set privacy settings for the others.”

Neil laughed out loud at his misery.

“Don’t laugh, *kaminey!*” Chinu said sarcastically.

“Don’t be mad at me,” Neil handed over his laptop to him and continued, “But if you make her block me too then I won’t spare you.”

-----τβπ-----

In their next conversation, while strolling through the corridor of her college, Avani introduced her best friend Pia to him.

“Pia is my best friend. My partner in crime. Both of us have made numerous excuses to have fun. We sneak out of our house for late night parties, bike rides and weekend trips. There is only one problem with her. She is a bit of a pseudo-feminist.”

She elicited Pia’s statement, “If a guy can have a relationship with four girls why can’t a girl have more than one relationship. In life, you should keep your options open.”

Neil told her about Baba, “You know Baba, right. We met at Kota for IIT prep. He was my junior over there but is my senior here. *Nityanand ka bada bhakt hai magar Nitya dukhi rehta hai* (A big devotee of Nityananand Baba but always cribs about everything). Nowadays, he is worried about his placement.”

Gradually, they started having conversations every day. She shared everything with him while he told her about their mischiefs. He introduced her to his hostel life while he came to know about her college life. During weekdays, they usually talked after 10 pm when everyone dozed off. But during weekends, she would call him after lunch hour.

She also told him about her other friends.

“Apart from Pia, I am very close to Rinichi and Amancha.”

“Amancha & Rinichi? Weird names?”

“Aman chacha and Rini chachi. I will let you to one secret. Both of them are married to each other.”

“What!”

“Not once, not twice but three times.”

“What the f...” Neil collided with a guy who was clicking photos of leaves and insects using a DSLR camera. After ‘Wake Up Sid’ and ‘3 Idiots’, people had discovered a new passion for photography.

Neil got up and said to the cameraman, “Picasso Saab, please save some photography tricks for the Jodhpur trip too.”

The cameraman showed his middle finger to Neil. He ignored the cameraman and headed towards his room.

“What happened?” Avani asked.

“Nothing, you were talking about a couple who got married thrice.”

“When we were in the first year of college, Rinichi forgot to wish him on his birthday at 12 o’ clock. The next morning, they had a big row on that. To coax him, she proposed by gifting him an engagement ring. In the heat of the moment, they went to the local church and exchanged vows. When Amancha turned twenty-one, they legalized their marriage in court.”

“Wow! But that is twice. How did they marry the third time?”

“Last year, we attended *Samuhik Arya Samaj Vivah Sammelan*. Seeing a thousand couples on the community ground, they were turned on to have a wedding. From that day onwards, we honoured them with the titles of Chacha and Chachi. And their behaviours and actions are also the chacha-chachi type.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Whenever they are with us, they talk in a code language.”

“Means?”

“For example, if Rinichi needs a hug from Amancha, she will say that she is getting bored. If Amancha wants to make out, he will suddenly start speaking about the weather. Today, there is humidity in the atmosphere. Clouds are nowhere to be seen in the sky today. Etcetera. Etcetera...”

“And if they want to do it?”

“Amancha will say that he wants to eat ice-cream.”

“Woooo!”

“You should have seen them during outdoor trips.”

“Why? What do they do?”

“In every trip, one of them would make an excuse of getting sick and the other would stay back. Also, they would book an extra room in advance. They think that we don’t know anything but everyone knows who sneaks out in the night.”

“They seem like the ‘*Made For Each Other*’ type.”

“Yeah, you are right. They are sweet. Seeing them together renews my faith in true love. They are perfect for each other. Amancha is a sincere guy. Nowadays, he is busy with CAT preparation so he gives us ample opportunities to learn new words every day. It’s fun talking to him every day. Last week, we were celebrating Pia’s birthday and I was pouring vodka into the glass. He said, ‘Please an ounce of unadulterated aqua pura with a fermented fluid.’”

“What does that mean?”

“Exactly! I asked him the same. He replied: *Daaru mein thoda sa hi paani daalna.*”

Neil burst into laughter.

“Rinichi is a bit of Mummy type. A bit OCD. Unvoted... Self... Proclaimed... Leader...” she stressed on each syllable, “She is a fan of Hitler... and rightly the Hitler of our group... You should see her during one of our group study sessions.”

She narrated one of the past group project meetings.

-----τβπ-----

The entire gang had gathered at Rinichi’s house. Avani and Rinichi had settled on her bed with their laptops. Rinichi was explaining a flowchart to her. Amancha sat on the floor near Rinichi’s feet, surfing through his mobile phone. Pia sat in a laidback position on a swivelling chair with a laptop on her lap.

“Guys, come here. This is an awesome video,” Pia said.

Avani got up from his place and rushed to watch the video on Pia’s laptop. Amancha got up from his place but retracted back when Rinichi flashed her big eyes.

“Guys, please, don’t waste time. We have a deadline to meet. The mid-term evaluation of our project is scheduled for the next week. We still don’t have any results for the submission,” Rinichi urged.

“We will submit the results of the secondary research. The laboratory results are not mandatory for the mid-term evaluation. We will deal with it during the end term,” Avani consoled her while watching the video.

Rinichi wasn’t convinced with her answer. Their guffaw on a funny video escalated her temper. When the video was over, Pia said, “You should have seen the video. It was the funniest video ever...”

She stopped abruptly when she saw Rinichi’s terrorizing expression and resumed her work. Avani also returned to her seat.

“Guys, why don’t you understand? If the report is not as per Aghora’s

standard, he will swallow us raw and won't even burp."

"We have to take a break from this boring project report," Pia said and rose to her feet.

"Who takes a break in just ten minutes?" Rinichi asked.

"Okay, fine," Pia said while sitting back.

"Pia, Rinichi is right. We should focus on our work," Avani winked at Pia but Rinichi saw that.

"Avani, is this fun for you?"

"No!"

"I saw you winking at Pia."

"Oops! Sorry."

"I don't want to waste time on your theatrics. Prepare the write-up on the secondary research and mail it to me."

Avani nodded.

All of them sat straight and resumed the work.

However, after working for half an hour, the situation transformed into the same one. Pia went outside for refreshment but didn't come back. Amancha was lost in facebooking on his laptop. Avani was busy playing with Rinichi's pet dog. She picked up a dog collar that was loosened to the size of a human's neck. She smiled and then tightened it around the dog. Only Rinichi was working on the project.

She called, "Aman!"

But he didn't respond so she pricked him with a ballpoint pen and called him again.

"Yes, baby? I mean, Mademoiselle? Sorry, that's for the unmarried. Yes, madame," Amancha faltered.

Avani giggled.

"Look here..."

“Emit your sweet sound. Your auditory impulse is being honoured...”

Aman’s eyes were glued to the computer screen. He took a bite of carrot which tasted weird. He examined the carrot, cleaned it on his shirt and ate again.

Rinichi saw that and lost her temper.

“I am not doing this,” she announced and leapt to her feet.

“What happened, babe?” Avani asked.

“Why have we gathered over here?”

“For our project.”

“I seriously doubt that. In the last five hours, we have been doing anything but the project work.”

“*Load kyun le rahi ho* (Why are you so stressed out)?”

“No, Avani, no! I am not stressed out. You should be the one who should take tension. Don’t you know how much important this is for you? If this project is not submitted on time, then it will be your dream that will be shattered and not mine. You should be concerned for this project. You know, we don’t have enough time to conduct experiments. But, I guess no one cares about it. You are playing with Johnny. Pia is out for a pee break but hasn’t returned. And Aman has taken out his vengeance of dieting on chips and cold drinks. Look at his exploding tummy.”

Amancha put a half-eaten carrot on the table.

Pia entered.

“Guys, Pooja dumped his loser boyfriend.”

“Really!” Amancha squealed.

Rinichi picked up a heavy book and threw at him.

“Why are you so happy?”

“I envisage Mademoiselle Pooja, a meritorious consort for my friend Jai.”

-----τβπ-----

“So, for the last four months, this is how our group project meeting happens,” she said, chipping some of the shiny blue nail polish from her ring fingernail.

Neil was laughing loudly.

“Why are you laughing?” she asked, standing up straight.

“Why shouldn’t I? This is bound to happen whenever friends gather for a group project. But, thank God, the Rinichi of our group is Baba.”

“You have also worked on a group project?” she asked, strolling into her room.

“Yeah, Baba had made us work for CV point,” he said and leaned back on the swivelling chair.

“What was the project?”

“Nothing special. We have designed one *farzi* (irrelevant) game for a local company.”

“Game! I would like to check it out. Why don’t you send it to me?”

“It wasn’t good.”

“Are you scared of losing?” she asked, cleaning her fingernail.

“Ma’am, I have designed that game.”

“Then, challenge me.”

“Okay, let’s see.”

Neil emailed her a link to download. It was a game-designed on the maze structure where two players would start from the opposite corners of the maze and to win they had to reach to the centre to collect the cup. A rotating wheel would suggest the number of steps at every instance. Also, each player had three chances to either add or remove a wall. Teleport cups, unexpected fireballs, bridges and protective armours had been added to make the game more interesting.

Within a few minutes, she understood the game.

“The design of the game is simple and easy. The animation could have



been better,” she remarked.

“I told you.”

“Nai, nai... I like the game. Let’s play.”

They started playing the game. They hung up their phone and were interacting via the text section features of the game. Though he had designed the game, she was beating him at each stage.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” Neil bellowed.

Neil typed the message.

Neil: *This is not fair! How can I lose? I have designed this game.*

Avani: *Haarela jeevda khai jeetela chevda khaai.*

At that time, Baba entered and started scouting for something fastidiously.

“What are you looking for?” Neil asked.

“Nothing.”

Baba bent down and surveyed under the bed. Then, he opened the cupboard but wasn’t satisfied. Neil was disturbed by his antics. Baba walked to his seat, pushed aside his legs and looked under the table. Neil carried his laptop and started walking out from the room.

“*Maharaj aap kyun kasth kar rahe ho? Hum tucch prani hi kaksh se prasth...* (Your Highness! Why are you bothering yourself? We, petty people, will walk out...),” His tongue got tied when he tried to speak in pure Hindi, “*Kaminey, bahot hua tera...* (Rascal, enough is enough).”

“What happened?”

“Whenever I see you these days, I find you busy talking to that *chudail* (witch). Don’t you understand? We, single souls, are blazing in jealousy.”

“Bhai, she is not my girlfriend. I am also single.”

“I don’t think so. For the last month, I have always found you doing *musu musu kuchu kuchu* with this girl. You have been completely ignoring us. Do you know what’s going on in my life? In Chinu’s life?”

“What has happened in Chinu’s life? Has Kusum filed a case for sexual harassment?”

“Fool! He cracked the internship at the AOL Games.”

“What the hell! Is that so?”

Baba nodded.

“Get out!” Neil said, pushing him. “I don’t believe you.”

“Unfortunately, he did.”

“Wow! This is amazing news, dude. What are we doing here? We should celebrate. We need a treat.”

“That’s why I was looking for a hookah.”

“*Nai, nai*, Baba. Just a hookah party won’t do. It should be a proper party.”

-----τβπ-----

In the evening, everyone took a proper bath and shaved. They put on their best clothes for the grand party.

Chinu inserted the key in the bike and hopped onto it.

“Were you playing NFS today?” Baba asked.

Chinu cursed and moved back vacating the rider’s seat. But Neil jumped and occupied the rider’s seat. Baba frowned, hit on his head and settled behind Chinu.

They went to the Rahul Raj Mall and played Laser Tag. When they were exhausted, they went to Barbeque Nation for live-grills and saucy appetizers. It was a big day. They wanted to burn a big hole in Chinu’s pocket. Baba and Neil weren't going to be satisfied with home-made liquor. They took him to Dumas beach and called a guy to deliver an original champagne bottle at a premium rate. Chinu, being Gujju, was upset with the cost of the bottle but when he saw the bottle, his disappointment transformed into jubilation. He popped it open and didn’t mind the overflow. They drank as if they had been thirsty for decades. They ordered few beer cans and proceeded towards the beach. They stopped their bike outside the police station and parked it before anyone could notice and went for a stroll by the

beach. When they were convinced that they were far enough from the sight of patrolling officers, Neil collected wood sticks and arranged them for a bonfire. Baba rummaged through the bag for the parts of hookah, tossed it to Chinu and ordered him to assemble it. Also, he pulled out a newspaper and spread it on the sand. Then he took out beer cans and a packet of spicy peanuts and made the arrangements for the last stage of their party.

-----τβπ-----

The sea waves were crashing and crawling rhythmically to the shore. The horizon seemed faintly lit by the lights of ships. The atmosphere was wafting with the soft voice of Jagjit Singh. The three of them sat around the bonfire while enjoying the cool breeze.

“Dude, I don’t get it. How could AOL Games hire this idiot?” Baba quipped and took a hookah drag.

“*Ghar ki whiskey paani barabar*,” Chinu responded and snatched the hookah pipe from him.

“Avani’s brother is also at AOL Games, you know,” Neil said.

Chinu got exasperated and said, “Dude, not again. We have already discussed this. You have to forget her. She has zoned you out from the very beginning,” Chinu said.

“Bhai, he is right. Forget her,” Baba supported Chinu’s statement.

“Baba, there is nothing between us,” Neil clarified.

“Then, why is that phone-sex still going on?” Chinu asked.

Neil didn’t utter a word.

Baba cleared his throat to spill his pearls of wisdom.

“Bhai, always remember, when you know that the bridge is broken, you shouldn’t drive on that road. It is important to take a U-turn at the right moment otherwise it will be difficult to turn back.”

“*Yogi Baba ki! Jai!*” Chinu chanted, “*Yogi baba ki...*”

“*Jai...*” Neil responded, raising his right hand.

Baba was irritated so he attacked Chinu, “Okay, I can understand his

case. What about you? Five years back, a girl dumped you but still, you are stalking her.”

Neil intervened, “Wait a minute, Baba. Do you know why Kusum dumped him?”

“Forget it, yaar,” Chinu dodged the question.

“She caught him handshaking on her photos,” Baba spoke under sneeze.

“*Haraamzaade!*” Chinu threw a beer can at Baba and yelled, “At least I was doing on real characters.”

“What do you mean?” Neil asked.

“Nothing.”

Baba too had some skeletons hidden deep in his closet.

“He is not as pious as he seems. Do you remember that Game Designing course?”

“Yeah, the usual torture for CV point.”

“Chinu, you promised,” Baba interrupted him while standing up.

Chinu also got up and stepped back. Baba rolled up his sleeves and approached him to close his mouth so that he wouldn’t blabber but Chinu escaped.

“What did Baba do?” Neil asked, wrapping his arms around Baba’s neck.

“Chinu, don’t utter a single word!” Baba struggled to get away from Neil’s grip.

“Tell me,” Neil said and tightened his grip but Baba was surprisingly strong and dragged him along.

“Baba designed a fantasy game to abuse himself.”

“What!” Neil exclaimed.

Baba forced himself out from Neil’s grip and scurried after Chinu who had no option but to run towards the sea. Baba chased him and dived on him.

Chinu lost his balance and stumbled into the sea, dragging Baba along. But Baba stood up, grabbed him and dipped him in the seawater. Neil also joined them. They wrestled a bit, then burst into laughter and started splashing water at each other. Later, when they were exhausted, they came out and lay on the sand peacefully.

“Baba, you are right. I will stop talking to Avani from tomorrow onwards.”

-----τβπ-----

The next morning, the vibration of the mobile phone woke up Neil. His eyes were stuck and refused to open. The cool sand of Dumas beach wasn't helping him to wake up. It felt good to sleep in the cool misty breeze. He pressed phone buttons randomly over his pockets to stop the buzz. Then, he covered his eyes with a handkerchief and dozed off. But a moment later the mobile phone tinkled again. Exasperatedly, he retrieved the phone from his pocket and narrowed his eyes to read. There were one missed call and two messages.

*Avani: Hi! I need a small favour.*

*Avani: You know Pia's cousin-Arun Bansal, right? Need to do his background check. Pia's father is fixing his marriage with his friend's daughter. He wants to be clear from both the sides. So, you have to give Arun's Character certificate.*

Neil grinned and typed the message.

*Neil: Tell uncleji that the boy is engineerzoned. He couldn't have a girlfriend. :(*

His eyes had adjusted to the morning light. He walked to the sea. The water was cold but he washed his feet and face. The mobile chimed again.

*Avani: Please, yaar. It would be a great help if you could find out a little about him.*

Baba had woken up too. Neil gestured him to wake Chinu.

*Neil: Cool! Will get back to you on this by the evening.*

They headed back to their hostel but this time Chinu was driving.

“Baba, you know Arun Bansal, right?” Neil asked.

“Who? Moogly?”

“Yeah, find out everything about him.”

“Why?”

Neil explained everything.

-----τβπ-----

“Yaar, even prisoners get a better meal than this,” Neil said while checking out daal.

“Let’s go upstairs and prepare Maggi,” Chinu suggested.

They stormed out of the mess and started climbing the stairs. Baba met them on the way. He handed an envelope to Neil.

“Everything is there in this envelope. His chats, mobile bill details of the last three months, all social media profiles, every mark-sheets, the latest CVs and the joining letter from Microsoft which he is supposed to receive by the following week.”

“Thanks, dude.”

“*Laat khayega* (Shall I kick you)?” Baba jibed and left.

-----τβπ-----

Neil studied all those documents and then dialled Avani’s number in excitement. But it dribbled down as soon as he heard a coarse manly voice. Instantly, he disconnected the call. He looked at the mobile clock and cursed himself for calling her before 10 pm. He was scared and hoped that she wouldn’t get into any trouble.

The next moment, he received a call from her number. He cancelled it and tossed the mobile on the bed. Pacing up and down across the room, he looked at the phone and then at her photos on the wall. He picked up a water bottle and gulped the water down all at once in anxiety.

‘*Avani is dead,*’ he thought.

Drumming the bottle on the table, he hoped for some magic to happen. Anxiety caused the water pressure on his bladder, so he went to the

washroom to lighten himself. When he returned, he saw the phone buzzing.

He heaved a deep breath and prepared himself to face the worst. Clearing his throat, he picked up the phone.

“Hello, I am speaking from Airtel Digital TV. We show all the latest movies on our platform. Which movie would you like to watch?”

Avani chuckled, “*Phas Gaya re Obama.*”

Neil let out a sigh of relief and sat in his chair.

“*Jaane tu yaa Jaane Naa,*” he sang.

They grinned.

“Ma’am, I have collected all the possible information about him. Pia’s cousin is the Aloknath of the batch.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, picking up a nail-polish bottle.

“FB report okay. Twitter report okay. No profile on Tinder. Only boring discussion related to assignments and projects on Google chat. Mechanical branch...” he took a pause and prayed, “Oh dear God! Please pardon me for suspecting the poor Mech soul. There is not a single girl in his class, how could he have a girlfriend?”

“So, is everything alright? I mean, does he prefer a front seat or a rear seat? In today’s world, we should check everything,” she asked while opening the nail polish bottle.

“I asked Baba the same thing. In the first year, everyone had the same doubt but then Arun was caught taking Jenny ma’am’s photo in class. Then, it became very much clear that he preferred the straight drive.”

“Good!”

She started applying polish on her nails while he was going through the papers.

“Nine pointer...,” he mumbled, “F\*ck! He wouldn’t be even watching porn.”

“Nisha will be a very happy girl.”

Neil started looking for Nisha on the Facebook.

*“Uncleji se keh do ki ladka sona hai... chandi hai... diamond hai diamond. Wo bhi Kohinoor (Tell Uncleji that the boy is a gem).”*

Meanwhile, Neil found Arun’s fiance on the Facebook.

*“F\*ck! Kya maal hai! Iski to lottery nikal padi (The girl is hot. He has won a jackpot.)”*

“What!”

“I am sorry.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t mind.”

Neil smiled and said, “Cool!”

“Hey! I forgot to tell you something.”

“Yeah?”

“I forwarded your game project to my brother. He liked the design, the layout and the efficient coding part. He has recomm...”

“Wait! Wait! Wait!” Neil interrupted her and asked, “What did you do?”

“I shared...”

“Why did you share my game with your brother?” Neil raised his voice which made her a bit uncomfortable. The nail-polish that she was applying smudged out.

“I thought...”

“What did you think?”

“Why? Is there any issue?”

“You shouldn’t have shared the game with your brother. Especially with an IITian.”

“I don’t get it.”

“In good faith, I shared that game with you but you broadcasted it everywhere.”



“Listen, I liked the game so I shared it. I didn’t know that it was a highly confidential NASA project. If it was such a restricted file then you shouldn’t have shared it with me.”

“You...compelled...me...to...” Neil spoke slowly.

“What did you say? Oh! I compelled you. I am extremely sorry...” she said sarcastically.

“Fine!”

“Whatever!”

“Whatever!” Neil mocked.

“Instead of being grateful, you are showing your attitude to me,” Avani retorted and cut the call angrily.

## 5. Woman On The Top

The next day, when Neil was in class, he was in a dejected state. He went through their past messages. It made his mood gloomier. He cursed himself for being so stupid. He had no right to bring his inferiority complex into their conversations. His insecurities had destroyed their beautiful camaraderie.

Chinu who sat next to him was unaware of his muddled thoughts. He yawned and drew circles in the book to kill time.

-----τβπ-----

“Tell me, I am an ass\*le,” Neil said when they were in the mess for lunch.

“You are an ass\*le,” Chinu was least bothered by his mood, “Why? What happened?”

“*Hag diya maine* (I messed up).”

Chinu shoved a piece of roti with aloo-sabji in his mouth, oblivious to his gloomy state. The rubbery roti and the tasteless aloo-sabji were his major concern. He called a mess boy and yelled at him but the boy had developed a thick skin. He ignored Chinu and left.

“At least, give me some pickle,” Chinu blabbered.

Neil grabbed a bowl of pickle from the next table and gave it to Chinu.

“What happened?” Chinu asked while taking a spoonful of the watery pickle on his plate.

“Yaar, I had a fight with Avani yesterday.”

“Are you still talking to that girl?”

Neil took a sip of daal from a bowl but spat it back on his plate.

“Is this *daal*? Piss tastes better than this.”

That was enough for the day. Neil and Chinu stood up from their seats. They decided to go to the canteen and order something more palatable. When they stepped out of the hostel gate, Neil received a call from an unknown number. He picked it up. Suddenly, his expression changed from gloomy to

normal to cheerful.

When he put down the phone, Chinu asked, “Who is pregnant?”

“Dude, AOL Games called me for an interview round.”

“What! This is awesome, dude!” Chinu greeted and hugged him.

Neil’s phone rang again. He released Chinu and saw the screen. Chinu read the name of the caller and said, “Cool! Talk to her.”

He picked it up.

“Hello!” Neil said.

“Hello!”

Her sweet voice reverberated in his ears.

“I think I overreacted yesterday. I shouldn’t have...” Neil started apologizing but she interrupted him.

“Listen, the fight had happened yesterday, right? Let the past Avani and the past Neil resolve it.”

“Cool!”

He nodded with a grin and then remembered the previous phone call.

“Listen, I want to share something with you.”

“Yeah, tell me.”

“I received a call from AOL Games. They are interested in hiring me for a summer internship.”

“What! Really! That’s awesome!” Avani squealed with joy.

“But there is just one problem.”

“What?”

“There is a Group Discussion round.”

“So?”

“I can’t even speak fluently in front of five unknown faces.”

“Don’t worry; I will guide you. My CAT prep should be helpful

somewhere.”

-----τβπ-----

Neil went to Mumbai. He sacrificed his long hair for the recruitment process. He felt strange and ran his fingers through his hair while sitting in the conference room where the Group Discussion was going to be held. There were five other candidates for the GD round: an eloquent bastard, a confident girl, a long-haired guitarist, a nerdy guy and a silent observer. The moderator hadn't arrived yet. He remembered Avani's advice of getting comfortable with the other candidates. So, he gave a smile and nodded to everyone.

Her advice was his last resort for cracking the GD round.

He remembered her words-*'The key to crack GD is confidence and timing. As soon as the topic is written on the board, without wasting even a single minute, start making notes.'*

The GD moderator entered the room and introduced himself. Then, he wrote the topic of discussion on the board and announced, “Guys, you have five minutes to structure your thoughts.”

Neil read the topic and was stunned. He looked around at the other participants who were busy scribbling notes on their paper. That scared him even more.

-----τβπ-----

Neil recalled Avani's advice.

“Never ever be afraid. Have faith in yourself. You know, what is the biggest challenge in cracking Group Discussion? We become self-conscious. We think about what others will think about us. Am I making sense or not? We are afraid of sounding stupid. Always remember: *'sab se bada rog kya kahenge log'* (the worst impediment is thinking what people think about you).

-----τβπ-----

Neil read the topic again: *'Woman on the Top'*. He was baffled but recalled her advice and started making notes. He drew various diagrams demonstrating that posture but felt embarrassed and struck it out.

The other candidates were judiciously making notes. That made him

more nervous. He flexed his neurons hard and scribbled more on his paper.

The moderator clapped to gain the candidates' attention.

"Okay, guys. You may start."

-----τβπ-----

He again recalled Avani's sweet advice, "The most important step in a GD round is to open the discussion. It reflects your leadership quality."

"But how can I start the group discussion?"

"Define the topic. Use a different kind of framework and models. For example- PESTLE model, SWOT analysis, Cause and Effect Model and so on. You can start with anything."

-----τβπ-----

Neil put down his pen and took a deep breath and commenced, "Good Morning, guys. This is an unusual topic: Woman on the top. However, let me start. One Rishiji...I couldn't recall his name... but he has described various positions in great detail. The main aim of all those positions is..."

The eloquent bastard interrupted him, "I guess, the topic means..."

But Neil cut him, "My good friend...let me finish first..."

Everyone stared at the eloquent bastard, so he chickened out.

Neil continued, "So, as I was saying that the main aim of all these positions is for the happiness of the couple. To ensure a happy married life! The position under discussion is very important. It allows the couple to explore each other. If you see from the '*Cause and Effect*' angle, then the chances of pregnancy improve in this position which is a fact, supported by medical studies."

The girl entered the discussion. Neil couldn't thank her more as he was feeling nauseated.

"Why only pregnancy? We should also talk about the excitement, fun and love, which a woman expects. Every posture has ignored the women's feelings. But the 'Woman on the top', which is also called the 'Cowgirl', has put her in charge of her pleasures. Basically, she is riding the scene here."

She went on explaining the importance and advantages of the postures. Since the topic was approved by a girl, no one dared to change the track.

Then, the eloquent bastard cut in and spoke loudly.

-----τβπ-----

“How can I enter for the second time?”

“It’s easy, dude. Short story, facts, figures, examples. Throw anything and everything. If possible, back your statement with statistics. It gives credibility to your arguments,” Avani advised.

“But, I find it difficult to cut someone mid-way.”

“I will give you one *Raambaan* (effective) solution. As soon as, the other candidate is about to end his sentence, you start by uttering ‘Adding to what...’”.

-----τβπ-----

“My friend says..., last month I read *Manorama* magazine that says... 69 percent women prefer this posture. In today’s fast and busy world, even guys prefer light fun. This position is the *Rambaan* solution for Premature Ejaculation. Here, the angle, the approach and ascent are more comfortable. This makes the entire experience ‘fulfilling’ for both of them.”

The long-haired guitarist who had a laidback attitude and sleepy eyes supported his argument, “Absolutely, right. However, we are ignoring the psychological pressure on a man.”

But the nerd who was silent till now intervened, “Who cares for the psychological pressure? At least the guy is having some action with a girl and not a ...”

His voice was lost in the noise of GD. Two groups were formed on the table and were talking rubbish. One group had taken the discussion to the development of genetic technology while the other group was discussing fertilizer subsidy.

“69! What was I thinking? *Rambaan! Nark mein bhi jagah nahi milne wali mujhko* (Even hell won’t accommodate me),” Neil murmured.

-----τβπ-----

“The third entry is very important and critical. To crack GD, minimum three entries are mandatory. However, by that time, the GD room would have turned into a fish market. You can’t even hear your own voice. In such a scenario, you have to raise your voice and speak until you shut every f\*\*king mouth. Better start with a quote, a poem or a general statement.”

-----τβπ-----

*“Yaha to beeti hai zindagi banzar registhan mein  
Yaha to beeti hai zindagi banzar registhan mein...”*

Neil raised his voice to recite a poem but the eloquent bastard kept on speaking along with him. Nevertheless, Neil persisted till the eloquent bastard gave up.

*‘...Pyaase ko paani se matlab hota hai lote ke rang se nahi  
Upar ho yaa neeche hume to rehna hai bangistan mein”*

The silent observer just nodded.

“The other positions are the exploitation of feminism but this one gives an opportunity to a girl to be in the driver’s seat and set the pace and the motion. This is about feminism.”

But soon, the eloquent bastard used Avani’s trick and made his way in the discussion, “Taking his point forward, we should discuss the political implication...”

Neil was relaxed now. He had done his part now. He was astonished at his performance. He was grateful to Avani for giving him those useful tips.

“Body language is very important. Use body gestures to show your enthusiasm,” Avani also said.

The nerdy guy said, “I will demonstrate how a top posture is the most beneficial....” he stood up from his chair and continued, “Assume, this is...”

The GD moderator was embarrassed.

“Stop!”

“Thank God!” the nerdy guy murmured.

“I don’t know what to say.” the GD moderator was stunned, “Actually, we didn’t make it clear enough. By ‘Woman on the top’, we meant, woman

in the top hierarchy of a management team.”

All eyes on the table whirled around at Neil. They were looking at him with a lot of disdain. If murder wasn't a sin, they would have killed him.

“Oh-uh!”

-----τβπ-----

Once he was out of the GD room, Neil narrated the entire incident to Avani. She guffawed at his condition.

“This is entirely your fault. Be confident. *Sab se bada rog kya kahenge log*,” Neil blamed her. He shoved his files into his bag.

“Arey, how is it my fault? I gave you amazing tips. Anyway, may I know what was that nerd going to demonstrate?”

“*Laat khayegi...*(Shall I kick you)!”

Avani was still laughing.

“I am terribly embarrassed. If I stay a minute longer, these people will eat me raw. I am leaving for Surat immediately.”

Neil packed his bag and slung it over his shoulder.

The peon appeared and announced his name, “Neil! Neil!”

Neil looked away and tried to sneak away but all GD participants pointed their fingers at him.

The peon said, “Sir is calling you.”

Avani said, “Go and meet them.”

“Pray for me. Tell Chinu that Baba is my best friend. And tell Baba that Chinu is my best friend.”

Avani said, “Don't panic. Just be confident.”

Neil followed the peon nervously.

-----τβπ-----

After finishing the meeting, Neil got into a cab. He dialled Avani's number.



“Guess what?”

“You nailed the interview.”

“They liked my creative thoughts and thinking-on-the-toe approach.”

-----τβπ-----

At the airport, Neil collected a plane ticket from the counter and sat in the waiting area. He again dialled Avani’s number to talk to her but she didn’t pick up his call. Later, she called him back.

“Listen, I have to do some wedding shopping for Pia’s cousin, so we will talk later.”

“Cool, we will talk in the evening,” Neil suggested while checking out his flight status on the arrival board.

“Sorry, we can’t. I have dance class in the evening,” Avani said, picking up her sweatpants and T-shirt.

“*Kabhi humein bhi mujra dikhao* (Kindly perform a belly dance for me too),” Neil spoke a filmy dialogue.

She grinned and retorted, “*Basanti kutto ke saamne nahi naachti* (Madonna doesn’t dance before dogs).”

She stowed her clothes in the bag.

-----τβπ-----

In the plane, for the first time, Neil felt restlessness. Though he had cracked the summer internship, he was clueless about the status of his relationship with Avani. He decided to confront her in their next conversation but then he thought otherwise. It would be too soon and he had a history of messing up. They didn’t know each other enough but he argued with himself. Sometimes, it takes aeons to know someone while the other times a second is enough.

He unlocked his phone and glanced at the screen to check the time left for the landing. Avani’s photo was set as the wallpaper. His hands moved over her face and a smile spread on his face. He leant back in his seat and gazed at the ceiling of the plane while taking a deep breath. He couldn’t wait to get down. But, then there was an announcement for a delay in the landing

of the plane, he yelled, “F\*ck!”

All eyes were on him. He buried his face in embarrassment.

Later, when the plane landed, he rushed out of the Jaipur airport and dashed to the taxi stand. He ordered the driver to drive as fast as he could. He couldn’t wait any longer to meet her.

The driver drove deftly through the evening traffic and dropped him outside her dance class. Neil opened the door but realised that he hadn’t brought anything for her so he went inside and asked the driver to find a flower shop. The driver wandered around in the search of a flower shop and halted when he spotted one. Neil jumped out of the car and bought a beautiful bouquet for her. There was a grocery store next to it. He quickly went there and picked up chocolates. Now, he felt well-equipped to meet her.

## 6. Chingari Koi Bhadke

Avani emerged from her dance class while discussing a dance move with her classmate. Her classmate performed for her which Avani enacted but failed. They shared a laugh about it. Avani promised to practise it at home and then parted. Her classmate sat on her Scooty, pressed the ignition button and left.

Avani was holding a bag but when she spotted Neil on the other side of the road, she lost her grip. He waved at her. Her hands reached for her mouth to cover it. His grin extended from ear to ear. She pointed her finger as if to confirm his presence. He signalled a thumbs up with a smile and approached her. Each step brought them closer making their breath heavier. He took longer steps and covered the distance.

“Wow! Tum! Yaha... kaise (What are you doing here)?”

Both of them were thrilled to see each other. She leaned forward to give him a hug but he extended his hand for a handshake. They collided and laughed. They couldn't contain their excitement and stared at each other, expecting the other to speak up.

They stood in silence for a while.

“Strange, right? We can't stop blabbering when we are on the phone but as we are face to face, not a single word from either of us,” she said.

He retraced his steps back. She wondered what he was doing. He whipped out his mobile phone. When her cell phone buzzed, he gestured her to pick it up.

“Hello!” she responded.

“Hi! If you remember, this Monday, my college has planned an industrial visit to Jodhpur to study the ancient architecture of forts. So, I have cancelled my plan of going to Surat and have come here for *Jaipur Darshan* (Sightseeing). Will you be interested?”

“*Jaipur Darshan* is very common. If you are interested, I will show you my favourite place.”

“Where?”

*“Yaha se 50 kos dur (100 miles far from here).”*

They burst into laughter and put down their phones.

“Cool!”

“Okay, then get ready by 5 o’ clock. I will arrange a bike.”

“5 o’ clock,” Neil mumbled.

-----τβπ-----

The next day, Neil waited for Avani at the porch of his hotel. He saw a Royal Enfield bike coming towards him. For a second, he wished to drive it. The bike screeched to a halt before him. He was astonished when the driver took off the helmet. It was Avani. She greeted him and took out a Harley-Davidson jacket from her backpack for him.

“What happened? You seem sleepy.”

“You asked to meet at 5 o’ clock,” Neil replied, wearing the jacket.

“So! You didn’t sleep at all in the night?”

“That was the only option. One of the sins of college life.”

“Have you seen your eyes? You need a nice cup of tea. Get on the pillion seat.”

He hopped on it comfortably. She put on the helmet and manoeuvred the bike through the city and out on the state highway.

They stopped at the Rampyaari Chai Centre and asked for a cup of tea. The small roadside tea stall served tea, coffee and a few snack items. A few benches were arranged before the stall. Neil and Avani settled on one of the benches. It was a cold morning and an hour-long drive had frozen them. As soon as the owner served tea and freshly fried onion pakoras, they attacked them. A sip of tea instilled new life in them.

The sun was about to emerge out over the horizon. It was playing Holi with the sky every minute. The sky turned from greyish to violet to purple to reddish orange. The view was entrancing. When a faint light crept into the sky, greenfield glowed majestically in the rising sun. The moment was magical. A flock of birds flew across as if welcoming the sunrise. It was the best start to their trip.

Suddenly, Avani's phone buzzed.

"Shit! Pia must be waiting for me to go to college. I will drop a message."

"Cool! I will also inform Chinu for a proxy."

She stopped typing.

"You...are...asking...Chinu...to...fill...your...proxy."

"Yeah! Why do you falter? What happened?"

"Nothing!"

"Don't tell me that you have never asked anyone for proxy ever."

"I never felt a need for a proxy. Most of the time, we have mass bunks. So, I don't mind attending classes."

"Ask for a proxy today."

"My attendance is almost full. I don't mind taking a day off."

"This is not a matter of attendance. The proxy has its own charm and thrill."

"I am okay."

"Are you scared?"

"Listen, *Avani darti nahi, daraati hai* (Avani never gets afraid but scares others)."

"Then, drop a message to Pia for the proxy."

She shrugged.

"Arey! How can you stay away from the thrill of proxy? What kind of stories will you share with your grandchildren? Will you tell them that you are a boring person? I didn't expect this from you."

"You are a bad, bad person."

She dropped the message to Pia for a proxy.

-----τβπ-----

After riding the bike for around two hours through green farmlands and a lot of villages, Avani stopped the bike outside a post office in the market area of the taluka. She asked him to get down and told him that the rest of the journey had to be covered on foot due to muddy paths. Since it was Saturday that day, a weekly shopping market-Shanivaari bazaar was held. It was crowded and noisy- people from the nearby villages had gathered around to shop for their weekly household needs. Avani and Neil also bought a few clothes and handicraft items for themselves and then strode down on a kuccha road passing through the local village.

Neil had seen the life of villagers only on TV. For the first time, he was witnessing it as he strode through the inner lane of the village. It was beautiful. Children were playing cricket on the field. Women were filling water in their pots. Men were taking their cattle to their fields. They stumbled across a bullock cart on their way and took a lift. It was a bumpy ride but a memorable one. After they crossed the village, they entered the farmlands. The bullock cart driver took them to his farms and offered them fruits and roasted peanuts. They ate it and then set off towards their final destination- her favourite place.

-----τβπ-----

After walking for another half an hour, they reached the foot of a hill. A lesser-known fort was visible on the top of it. Without wasting another minute, they started stepping up.

But the climb was steep and a bit tough. It was one of the reasons for being the least favourite among the tourists.

“The path leading to the fort was intentionally made uneven to avoid any attack on the fort. Even horses will find it difficult to climb,” Avani said.

Neil was panting. However, when he reached the top, he was thrilled to see the glorious fort.

“So, what is the story behind this fort?”

“This is the glorious Noor-Mahal, built by Raja Rudrapratap Singh for his beloved queen Sanam. He loved her more than anyone else in the whole world. As she followed the Islamic faith, he knew that she might be in danger from his well-wishers. So, he built this fort on the top of this hill.”

The fort was surrounded by a fifteen feet high wall for protection but it was in ruined condition now. The entrance was constructed in such a manner that the soldiers on the top of it had a clear shot for attacking an enemy army.

They entered the fort and found a few people roaming around and posing for a photo session. The fort premise included a palace, servant quarters, a horse stable, a granary and a temple with a step well beside it. The palace was ruined but looking at it gave an idea that it would have been glorious in its heydeys. Not too big or opulent but enough for the honour of the queen. It still had the remnants of its glorious past- a beautiful entrance with carved pillars, spacious rooms and courtyards.

Though the architecture was inspired by the Mughal architectural style, the king being a Shiva devotee had constructed a temple inside its perimeter. The exterior wall of the temple was beautifully carved in Sanskrit. Most of it was ruined.

“Can you read these inscriptions?” Avani asked.

“Yeah, it is written in Hindi. I mean, Sanskrit.”

“But, the beauty is that the language used is Arabic.”

“Oh! You mean, like our Hindi message in English letters.”

“Exactly! But the verses were encrypted, very difficult to decipher. Last year, a team of archaeologists came to study it. Everything seemed to be gibberish to them. The only verse they could decipher was: Water is a channel for life.”

Neil laughed at that.

“Let’s go inside the Shiva temple,” he suggested.

“Cool! But we have to wash our hands and legs in that step well first. It’s a ritual over here.”

They descended down into the step well.

“The drinking water for the queen was collected from here,” Avani said.

Neil studied the design of the stepwell and commented, “This doesn’t make sense.”

“What?”

“This stepwell is drawing water from a natural stream but it doesn’t seem to overflow.”

“This is one of the ancient engineering marvels. To keep water fresh and cool, there is a secret circular water channel that leads the overflowing water out from here to the lake beneath this hill.”

They washed their feet and climbed the steps back to the temple. They plucked a few jilledu flowers and leaves of Indian bael to offer to Lord Shiva. Avani warned him on the poisonous nature of the flowers. He asked her why it was allowed to grow then. She replied if it was mixed with other plants, it could also serve as an antidote. Chemistry is magic.

After worshipping Lord Shiva, she led him to a minaret constructed of red sandstone. It contained a spiral staircase of almost a hundred steps. A board hung there instructing not to climb but Avani ignored it and asked Neil to follow her. The top of the minaret overlooked the village and the beautiful lake. They sat there for a while and enjoyed the scene.

“One more architectural marvel of those days. There was a large bell over here. If one rang it, the air current was such that it would alert soldiers sitting over that highest point almost a kilometre away.”

“If this place was so secure, then how did it turn into a *khandar* (ruins)?

Avani cleared her throat and started singing the old song from the movie ‘*Amarprem*’.

*Chingaaree koi bhadake,  
to saawan use buzaaye;  
saawan jo agan lagaaye,  
use kaun buzaaye?*

(When a spark flares up,  
The rains extinguish it;  
But if the rains light a fire,  
Who will put it out?)

Before she could sing the next line, a guard located them and cursed them for climbing the restricted minaret. She seized his hands and quickly



stepped down. They saw a guard approaching them so they escaped through the exit gate.

-----τβπ-----

They got down the hill faster than they had climbed it.

Beneath the hill, they visited the graveyard. There were two tombstones: one of the queen and the other of her child. They paid their respects.

There was a beautiful lake beside it. A few children were swimming and playing in it. Neil also dived into the pond and played with the children. He called her to join them but she refused.

When he came out, she quipped, “You were enjoying like a pig.”

“*Tum gaali de rahi ho yaa taarif kar rahi ho* (Are you praising me or insulting me)?”

“Of course, *gaali de rahi hu* (I am insulting you)!”

“What did you say?”

He squinted his eyes.

“Nothing.”

She gave a wicked smile and retraced her steps back.

“I will kill you.”

She quickened her steps and ran. He chased her.

-----τβπ-----

At the local *dhaba*, Neil went to the storage room to change his clothes. He pulled out the clothes that he had bought at a local Shanivaari market.

Her phone buzzed. She picked it up.

“Shit!”

He came forward while buttoning his shirt.

“What happened?”

“For the first time in my life, I asked someone for proxy but got

caught.”

-----τβπ-----

The roll numbers were called in the class. Pia uttered ‘Present’ when Avani’s name was called out. She punched her fist in the air to celebrate her victory. But later, the professor announced, “Students, we are distributing our annual magazine. Each one of you will have to come over here, sign on this sheet and collect it.”

“Uh-oh!”

-----τβπ-----

“This is your fault,” Avani patted his back. She was on the pillion seat while Neil was riding the bike this time.

“How is it my fault?” Neil argued with a smirk.

“How can you stay away from the thrill of proxy?” Avani mocked.

Neil laughed loudly.

“Don’t laugh,” Avani said and hit again.

“Hey, don’t hit me else we will fall...”

“That will be better than the embarrassment of proxy.”

Neil guffawed.

Later, Avani also grinned from ear to ear.

## 7. Know Thyself

“This is awesome,” Neil said after taking a sip of Kesar Kasturi (Rajasthan’s special drink) at the local *theka* (pub).

“In old days, this golden coloured beverage was specially prepared from saffron (Kesar), honey and dry fruits. It used to be the favourite drink of kings,” she informed him and took a sip. “Have you heard of Roger Moore?”

Neil sang the signature tune of James Bond.

“Exactly! He was very fond of Kesar Kasturi.”

“Let me buy this for Chinu and Baba.”

Neil asked the bartender to pack two bottles.

“Would you like to watch a movie?” she suggested.

“But, there isn’t a good release.”

Avani pointed at the poster of a movie ‘*Pyaasi Chudail*’.

“Horror movie? I find them funnier than comedy movies. The opening of the old door...krrrrrrr... Emerging hands from a basin or a bathtub...,” he mocked. “Have you seen those old horror movies where terror scene was created by the croaking sounds of frogs...”

Avani gave a frown look to him.

“Would you like to see them for real?”

“I am looking at...”

“Very funny!”

Neil flashed an embarrassed smile.

“If you think that all of this amusing, then let’s visit a cursed palace nearby,” she suggested.

“I would, but I am feeling sleepy.” He yawned.

“What happened? Are you scared?”

“Listen, *Neil darta nahi daraata hai* (Neil never gets afraid but scares others).”

“Then, let’s go.”

-----τβπ-----

They went to the old cursed palace.

Neil took some steps back and slowly turned his head down. Then, his eyes darted up slowly. Avani observed him strangely.

“Did you see anyone else on the hilltop at Goa?”

She was confused.

“Have you ever talked to any of my friends?”

“Dude, stop it.”

“I am a ghost.”

“And I am a witch.”

“Come on, Avani. Be a sport.”

But suddenly, they heard the sound of something falling from the upper floor. He jumped and embraced her.

“What are you doing? Stay away.”

“Someone is there!”

“There is no such thing as a ghost.”

“It must be a dog or a cat.”

But then, they heard the sound of someone stepping down.

“Avani, someone is coming down the stairs,” he said and hid behind her.

“Then, it must be a thief.”

“What will a thief steal from the ruined palace?” He asked and picked up a log of wood.

Avani was also scared a bit but put on a brave face. She picked up a wooden stick that was lying around. They heard whispers again and moved back slowly. Neil regretted for pretending to be a knight in shining armour at the local pub. They stepped back but were ready to attack anything that

appeared before them. They heard the sound of movements in the room. Their hearts were throbbing. He retraced back but collided with someone who was looking in the other direction. Neil turned back and raised the log to attack but he identified the other guy.

“Amancha!” Neil gasped.

Amancha was trembling with fear and hit him on his shoulder.

“Ouch!” Neil shrieked.

Amancha was scared as hell and shouted, “Rini, help me! The ghost knows my name.”

He struck again but Neil defended this time by putting forward his log of wood.

Rinichi encountered Avani and asked, “Avani! What are you doing over here?”

-----τβπ-----

“What are you doing, guys?” Avani asked when they sat around the bonfire in the veranda (porch) of the ruined palace.

“Maybe they have a penchant for frozen yoghurt in this balmy duskiness,” Neil intervened.

“What!” Rinichi exclaimed.

Amancha was embarrassed.

“We came here to celebrate our wedding anniversary,” Rinichi clarified.

“Which one? The Court marriage, the Aryasamaj wedding or the Church one?”

Amancha and Rinichi were shocked. Avani flashed her wide eyes at Neil.

“Who are you?” Rinichi asked.

“Sorry,” Avani said and introduced Neil to them, “He is my good friend Neil. He has come to Jaipur for sight-seeing.”

Then, she pointed at Amancha and Rinichi, “Neil, you know them- Amancha and Rinichi.”

Neil shook hands with Rinichi and Amancha. They disliked his invasion of their privacy. But Neil knew how to woo them. He snapped as if he remembered something and picked up his bag. After rummaging through it, he whipped out an old edition of ‘*Mein Kampf*’ from his bag.

“One of the oldest editions of *Mein Kampf* for Rinichi.”

She was elated to hold the old book on Hitler. She embraced him. Amancha was jealous when she did that. Neil observed that.

“We had bought something while coming over here. I think Amancha will like to open it on their wedding anniversary.”

Neil pulled out a bottle of Kesar Kasturi from the bag and handed it over to Amancha. His eyes twinkled seeing the bottle. He thanked him and opened it.

“He is a great guy. He should come tomorrow,” Amancha said and took a sip.

“Where?” Neil asked.

“But, he has to go to Jodhpur for his industrial trip on Monday,” Avani interrupted.

“He can go to Jodhpur from there. The wedding is tomorrow. You should attend it. It will be fun,” Rinichi proclaimed.

-----τβπ-----

The next evening, they went to attend the wedding. Avani was getting dressed for the wedding. Neil was ready and was waiting outside the room.

“But, Moogly, sorry, Arun is in the final year. Why is he marrying so soon?”

“His grandpa had a cardiac arrest last week. Very critical condition. His last wish was to see him getting married.”

“Last wishes! *Yeh buddho ki aakhri ichcha kabhi khatam hi na...*” but he stopped when she emerged from the room, Neil was stunned by her beauty. She was dressed in a green coloured lehenga having a beautiful

traditional Rajasthani embroidered work. A golden necklace glittered on her slender neck. Her loose hair swayed over her shoulders gracefully. He was amazed at how she would take away his breath every time. He stared at her that made her a bit self-conscious. She frowned at him and gestured to him with her eyes to look away.

“*Itni kaatil nazaron se mat dekho* (Don’t give me that murderous look). I may die!” Neil quipped.

“Don’t worry, I will hunt down Dragon balls for you.”

-----τβπ-----

When they came out of the house, Neil stared at a girl walking beside a burkha-clad lady.

“I think I have seen her somewhere,” Neil observed her carefully. “She looks like Jenny ma’am.”

“Who is Jenny?”

“Arey, Jenny ma’am! I told you about her. She punished Arun for clicking her photo in class.”

“Oh, shit!” she exclaimed and darted towards Jenny ma’am. He realised his mistake and followed her. But before they could catch them, Jenny ma’am and the burkha-clad lady escaped on a bike.

Avani and Neil hurried to Arun’s room.

“I asked you to check if he had any love affair or not,” Avani hit him on his arm.

“I did conduct a thorough research but there were no traces of any affairs. How would I know that he would be so smart that he would woo Jenny ma’am?”

“I am dead,” she said, entering Arun’s room.

Pia was reading Arun’s farewell letter.

“What will we do now?” Pia asked.

“I am sorry, Pia. He had done thorough research. Nobody in the college knows about his affair,” Avani defended Neil.

“I am not blaming you but what shall we do?”

Her parents entered.

“The bride ran away,” they said in unison

“And the groom too,” Rinichi said.

Tears started flowing incessantly from her mother’s eyes. Her father sank into the nearest chair. The scene was no lesser than that of a routine saas-bahu teledrama.

“The wedding has to be conducted, Pia. It has to be,” her father said and gazed at her. “Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Papa, what are you saying?”

“Grandpa is not in a condition to handle this situation.”

“Papa, be practical. Why are you sacrificing my entire life for grandpa?” Pia argued.

“Sorry to intrude in your family matters,” Neil interrupted, “If the wedding is important then why don’t ...”

His eyes moved from Amancha to Rinichi.

“You are right. Rinichi, let’s go to the bride’s room,” Avani said.

Pia understood their plan and followed them. From the balcony of the bride’s room, a saree was hung. Rinichi clutched it and climbed up. Pia and Avani followed her.

Neil helped Amancha to put on the groom’s sherwani.

“I don’t understand,” Pia’s father asked. Neil explained the relationship of Amancha and Rinichi and their wedding stories. Pia’s father hugged Amancha and gave his blessing.

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The next morning, Avani went with him to the railway station. Neil had hardly slept for two to three hours for last the three consecutive nights but still, he wasn’t sleepy. There was a restlessness in him. He paced up and down frantically and tried to calm himself. He gazed for the arrival of the train and then looked at Avani.



“I can’t hold this anymore. Let’s not pretend that you aren’t aware why I have come here.”

She nodded her head.

He spoke slowly, “Then, please say ‘yes’.”

“Neil, try to understand.”

“Why? What is the problem? We like to talk to each other. We like to share happy moments with each other, sad moments with each other. I know more about you than yourself and vice versa. If this is not love, then what is it?”

“I have already told you that I will be leaving this country for my post-graduation.”

“Yeah, you had mentioned that but...”

“Then?”

“Can’t you pursue your higher studies over here?”

“But there aren’t enough good facilities in India. I want to do research. I have to go outside India.”

“Okay, how many years? One year, two years or five years. I will wait for you.”

“Maybe I won’t come back. Because the research opportunities that I will get over there has no match compared to the limited opportunities in India.”

“Avani, please don’t go.”

“I can’t.”

“Why? Don’t you love me?”

Neil was irritated.

“Try to understand. Don’t make it difficult for me.”

He was losing his patience.

“You aren’t trying to understand this. Why isn’t this possible?”

“Neil, we are such good friends. Why are you spoiling everything?”

“I am spoiling this? You are spoiling everything. You are being a selfish bitch!”

“Wo! What did you say?”

The train honked and arrived at the platform.

“Aren’t you thinking of yourself only?”

“Who is unsure of one’s life? You! But you are insulting me? Calling me a selfish bitch. At least I am living for myself. You aren’t even doing that. If you think so highly of yourself then why don’t you come over there? But you can’t. You know, why? Because you don’t have a purpose in life or a passion in life. No one becomes Gulzar by blabbering. You are professing love to me but do you love yourself? You are claiming that you know me but do you know even yourself? What do you want to do in your life? Are you passionate about anything? Have you fervently fought for anything in life? Have you cried incessantly for anything? No, I don’t think so. But asking me to drop my dreams...”

Avani choked and glared at him.

Neil’s eyes turned down in embarrassment. Silence reigned between them on the noisiest platform. The crowd started rushing towards the train and pulled him along. With moist eyes, he clutched his bag and turned towards the door.

She watched him boarding the train with tear-filled eyes.

When the train left, she heaved a sigh. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

## **8. Deceptive Shadow**

### **PAST REVISITED**

After appearing for her exams of class 11, Avani went to Goa to surprise her boyfriend. However, when she entered his room, she was appalled to find her best friend Jyoti in the bed.

“Jyoti? What are you doing over here?” Avani’s eyes opened wide.

Avani’s boyfriend emerged from the bathroom in a towel.

“What the hell!” Avani snarled and threw the wrapped box at him.

“I can explain,” Jyoti said, getting up from her bed. She covered herself with a quilt.

“What is there to explain? You said you would be with your grandpa. Is he your grandpa? You, bitch.”

“Watch your tongue...” Avani’s boyfriend warned and trudged towards her but Jyoti held him.

“Dhruv, please don’t. She is my best friend.”

Avani was flabbergasted by his behaviour. She and Dhruv were in a relationship for the last three years but he had never treated her so bluntly. She slammed the door and left. All hell broke loose on her. The infidelity of her boyfriend with her best-friend was very painful. She broke into tears and dashed out of the hotel. Before she realised where she was heading, she had climbed up to the lover’s point.

On the edge of the peak, she sat and gazed at the dark clouds hovering over the Arabian Sea. Wiping her eyes, she contemplated on what mistake she might have made. Being busy wasn’t a crime. Being ambitious and devoted to work shouldn’t kill a relationship. She had always made a point to spare time for him. Did she deserve such deception? No, she didn’t. She had many questions but for the wrong answer.

It was drizzling but it didn’t lift up her sinking mood. Nevertheless, she looked up at the sky and rose to her feet. God had punished her for being in love. Her chest was aching. She raised her hands and complained to God for being so unkind to her.

She closed her eyes and prepared to jump but a sweet voice reverberated in her ears.

“Hey! Be careful or you may fall.”

She opened her eyes and turned to the direction of the voice.

“This may be called ‘Lover’s Point’ but many tortured souls have taken their lives here. It is being said that their ghosts wander around here. If you stand too close to the edge of the cliff, they may push you down.”

“*Jo apni jaan nahi bacha paaye wo meri jaan kya lenge* (How will those who can’t save themselves kill me off)?”

She didn’t know why she gave such a tongue-in-cheek reply to a complete stranger.

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The guy seemed sincere and safe to her. He wasn’t hitting on her nor was he trying to impress her but genuinely putting forward his viewpoint. Chatting with him alleviated her pain. It diverted her attention from her deceiving boyfriend. Though their conversations were on irrelevant topics, they were enchanting. Actually, a conversation is just an excuse. What every human craves for is company and a desire to share feelings. Sometimes, a chit-chat about a kidney stone with a right person can be juicier than a conversation about Khajuraho with a vapid person.

Later, when she sneezed, he took out a handkerchief from his pocket immediately and offered it to her. But while doing so, a translucent plastic packet dropped onto the ground. Avani picked it up and asked, “What is this?”

He snatched it from her hand and stowed it in his pocket.

“Is it what I think it is? *Shivji ka prasad*?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Can we?” she suggested and gestured by putting two fingers to her lips and inhaling.

The gloomy day wasn’t bad after all. She didn’t even realise when the darkness turned into dawn. Before, the sun peeped out from the ocean, they

descended down.

She went to the parking space of the hotel to fetch her Acura which she had borrowed from her cousin who worked at a local club. She sat on the seat and inserted the keys but found Jyoti making out with Dhruv.

Avani marched towards them, grabbed her wrist and slapped her. Before Jyoti responded, Dhruv raised his hand but stopped.

“First and last warning! Don’t dare to touch her again!”

“You don’t know her very well. She is a bitch. She has seduced you with her innocent looks,” Avani said.

“Don’t utter a single word against Jyoti. She didn’t seduce me. I wooed her. She means everything to me. I didn’t want to end things in this manner but you have left me no choice. We are over.” He pushed her away. “No one can be happy with you. You, self-obsessed bitch. Do you hear what I say? We are over.”

With fat tears in her eyes, she drove out of the parking space.

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She couldn’t take the shit anymore and accelerated the Acura. She was about to hit an oncoming car but its driver steered it safely at the last moment. The car driver stopped ahead but she didn’t and veered her bike into the internal lane for the shortcut to the nearest bridge.

With a gloomy face, she raised the accelerator but encountered a boy jumping onto the middle of the road. She applied the brakes instantly. The Acura screeched a bit before halting. It was the same boy from the peak. He was seeking her help. Before she could comprehend what he spoke, he and a semiconscious guy settled behind her. They moved around scouting for a hospital.

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At the veterinary clinic, after the patient vomited the sleeping pills out, the vet yelled, Don’t! I don’t want to hear any of your stupid excuses. Suicide has become fashionable nowadays. A Low EQ generation. Never think of anyone else and choose the easiest option-ending life. Don’t have the guts to face a situation like a true man. For God’s sake, life is not a video game

where you get numerous chances. You have only one chance to live. Learn to value your life. Don't throw it away like an idiot."

He then scribbled a prescription note and asked the guy to get it as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, she received a call from her cousin.

"Avani, where are you? I need my vehicle."

"Didi, I am..."

"Avani, get back soon. You had enough fun with your boyfriend. I have an important meeting to attend. I am already very late. Please come back soon."

"Okay."

She took the Aactiva to return it to her cousin. That was the biggest mistake of her life. Because when she returned back to the veterinary clinic, the vet told her that the patient was shifted to a hospital.

She scouted the nearby hospitals and clinics for him but was disappointed.

-----τβπ-----

Avani returned to Jaipur and changed her school. Putting the entire boyfriend's chapter aside, she concentrated all her attention on her studies. Due to her bad experiences, she turned into a loner at her new school. Jyoti and her ex-boyfriend had made it difficult for her to make new friends or form a new relationship. Every day, she came to school five minutes before it started and left as soon as the bell rang. In the break, she sat alone in the corner of the cafeteria and ate her food silently. In the class, she was a favourite among her teachers but among students, everyone disliked her guts. If there was any free period, she dashed to the library.

Sometimes, she remembered the guy she had met on the peak. She cursed herself for not asking his name. He was no lesser than an angel who had come to save her life. God is very strange. He won't give you what you ask for but he gives you what you need. Another angel that she needed soon came into her life.

During the midterm exam, a girl who sat in the next row asked her to

show the answers. First, Avani ignored her but when the girl folded her hands, Avani sat in such a manner that the girl could have a clear view of her paper. However, the girl was slower than Avani and couldn't finish the answer so Avani had to pass her the extra supplementary. The girl thanked her and copied from it. Ten minutes later, the girl returned that and borrowed another supplementary. But, this time, the invigilator saw her movements. Luckily, he couldn't make out what they were doing but he asked her to change her seat and move to the front row.

After the exam was over, the girl approached Avani.

"Hi! I am Pia. Thank you and sorry," the girl introduced herself.

"Hi! I am Avani! I understand 'thank you' but why the 'sorry'?"

"You have lost seven marks due to my fault."

"It's okay."

A couple also arrived there. Pia introduced them to her.

"Avani, this is my friend Rini and her boyfriend Aman."

-----τβπ-----

After passing out of school, Avani planned to make a career in the field of chemistry. Not only did her friends Pia, Rini and Aman choose the same field but a boy named Jaimin chose it too.

On the day of registration and branch selection, Jaimin was charmed by her beauty. He was standing right behind her in a queue. When he found out that she had chosen 'Chemistry' as her preferred branch, he struck out 'Biotechnology' and wrote 'Chemistry' above it.

During their induction process, one of the seniors made them stand in the queue. Jaimin stood behind her and was checking her out. One of his friends caught him doing so. From that day onwards, all of his friends started to link his name with her name and tease him.

One day, one of his friends pushed him. He was about to fall on Avani. He was very embarrassed. He chased that friend over the entire campus.

On 'Rose Day', he gifted a bouquet of roses to her anonymously.

On Valentine's Day, Jaimin's friend gave the ultimatum that if he

didn't ask her out then he would be gifted with ruthless bumps. After the class, Jaimin approached her for a coffee date but she politely rejected the offer.

The next day, in the laboratory, Jaimin was conducting a titration practical. When she glanced at him, he gazed beseechingly at her and then gestured a drinking signal with a beaker but she rejected the offer by shaking her head.

A month later, she took the gang along with her to Goa. They climbed up to the Lover's point. The next morning, she loitered around searching for the vet clinic but came to know that the vet had migrated to the USA with his family. The clinic had been replaced with a souvenir shop.

The next day, when she entered the classroom, she found a diagram of a coffee mug with steam over it drawn on the blackboard. She stepped up the podium and wiped it out with a duster.

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"You know, what's your problem?" Pia asked Avani as they showed their identity cards to volunteers and walked into the auditorium. Their cultural event '*Rhapsody*' was going on. It was a four-day event featuring four events: 1) Dancing competition, 2) Singing competition, 3) Fashion and 4) Drama. It was the second day of the event.

"What?" Avani asked while looking for seats.

"You are afraid of getting close to anyone," Pia said and climbed up the steps for the last row seats.

"I am close to you, Rinichi and Amancha."

"That's because we made efforts to include you in our gang as we know you are a good-hearted girl. But even we don't know you well."

They reached the last row.

"You know my family background and where I studied," Avani said, making her way through occupied seats in the last row.

"Avani, I wasn't talking about that. I was talking about your old friends and your life before meeting us. You don't share anything."



“There is nothing to share.”

“Even trees have a story. Either your past is too horrible or you are too horrible,” Pia said, occupying an emptying seat.

“Okay, since, you are my best friend and I don’t want to lose you, I promise that I will tell you. But give me some time for that,” Avani said, settling into the seat beside her.

“Cool! Whenever you are ready.”

“Thanks! But I don’t understand one thing. Why, all of sudden, did you bring that up?”

“You know the guy on the podium,” Pia pointed at the guy behind the mic on the stage.

“Jaimin?”

“*Achcha banda hai*. He has been trying to woo you since day one. But you are not letting him into your life because of your past experiences. It’s not fair to him. I think you should give him a chance. Don’t let your past dictate your present and future.”

Jaimin cleared her throat and began singing the song.

*You are a pure spirit,  
That has intoxicated me.  
Unlike Heisenberg, I am certain  
That I am on the crescendo,  
But Kelvin will be Okay.  
Because I wanna be caffeined.  
Not cocaine not nicotine,  
I wanna be caffeined.  
I don’t wanna be benzene either  
Lost in its own cycle.  
May be zinc if you are iron  
Shielding from every misery.  
Unlike Heisenberg, I am certain  
Like you, Without you, I am self-destroying,  
But Kelvin will be Okay.*

*Because I wanna be caffeined.  
Not cocaine, not nicotine but  
I wanna be caffeined.  
Take some and give some  
But end this lonesome.  
And gel as brimstone  
Strengthening the bond.  
Only one wishes, like Lead,  
That you be my alchemist.  
PS: J is missing you periodically  
And wanna be caffeined.  
Not cocaine, not nicotine,  
I wanna be caffeined.*

-----τβπ-----

“Best proposal ever!” Rinichi squealed in the excitement when she met Avani and Pia outside the auditorium. Amancha rolled his eyes.

She ignored that and added, “Avani, why are you acting stupid? Say yes to him. He is smart, tall and good looking.”

“Can’t you see me? I am right here,” Amancha said.

“If you don’t say yes. I will.”

“Am I invisible?”

“Okie-dokie, my possessive cutie-pie,” Rinichi said, pinching his cheek. “Don’t be jealous.”

Avani approached Jaimin.

“Let’s get caffeined.”

Jaimin jumped in joy and punched his fist in the air.

-----τβπ-----

Avani started going on dates with Jaimin to various places. Every movie was watched at the theatre and analysed during dinner. Every week, they roamed around Jaipur and visited old palaces. He taught her to drive his Royal Enfield. They went to his favourite place: Noor Mahal. She was

fascinated by the ruined palace and dazzled by the little-known history behind it.

Jaimin was living his dream with his crush. But, the happiest person in this relationship was Rinichi. Finally, she found a stable couple for a double date.

-----τβπ-----

One day, Pia was shuffling through her photos on the laptop. Avani was in laidback position while drinking tea on her bed.

“Don’t think too much about it. Jaimin is perfect for you.”

“You are right. But, Pia, I don’t feel that connection.”

“Baby, trust me, only one connection is important in life.” She winked. Avani threw a pillow at her.

“Shut up!”

Pia leaned back and smirked.

“Wait! Wait! Wait!” Avani squealed and leapt to her feet, “Who is that?”

“Who?”

“Go to the previous photo.”

“He is my cousin Arun.”

“Not him. I am talking about the boy behind him,” Avani said, pointing at the laptop screen.

“I don’t know.”

“Finally,” she pulled Pia’s hands and waltzed a bit with her, “He is that *Goawala banda* (Goan boy).”

But her jovial expression faded away when she realised that she was already committed to Jaimin.

-----τβπ-----

However, Avani wanted to meet her saviour once, so she cajoled Pia and went to her cousin’s college in the general coach of the train from Jaipur

to Surat.

“Waah! *Aashiqui aapki aur general ke dhakke hum kha rahe hai* (Why am I being tortured in this general coach for your love)?”

“It’s not love. I just want to meet him once and end it. I hope he is an assh\*le.”

-----τβπ-----

“He is not an assh\*le except that he wore strong deodorant. But that is manageable,” Pia remarked when they were returning back in the AC coach after meeting Neil.

“I don’t care...Everything is over,” she announced and stared out of the window in a confused state.

-----τβπ-----

“It was over,” Avani said.

“What happened?” Pia asked.

“He sent a Friend request.”

“So?”

“Nai, yaar. If I accept his request, everything will be messed up.”

“Don’t worry; you won’t mess up. You can’t fall in his love. I asked Arun to dig up info. about him.”

“And?” Avani’s eyes lit up.

“He is not your type. Zero goals, a single-membered family due to daddy issues, two a bit shorter, three cigarettes a day, forbidden love-you know why and five-pointer.”

-----τβπ-----

Though Avani didn’t accept his friend request, she couldn’t stop herself from checking his profile and photos. While practising dance, she often imagined herself dancing with him.

One night, she was jolted awake at night after a nightmare. Later, she picked up her phone and looked at his pics.

-----τβπ-----

At one of their girl's party, they were playing 'Truth or Dare'. The bottle pointed at Avani. Rinichi was thinking hard.

"Give her a dare to accept that friend request," Pia intervened.

"What request?" Rinichi asked.

"Nothing." Avani dodged the topic.

"Then, ask her to tell us about him."

"About whom?" Rinichi asked.

"Bitch."

Pia smirked.

-----τβπ-----

"I am relieved. I signalled him that there would be no scene between me and him. I told him that I am going to the USA for my post-graduation," Avani said to Pia when they were window shopping at the mall.

Pia was bored with her conversation. She saw a poster of the new James Bond movie.

"Would you like to watch this movie?"

-----τβπ-----

"Jaimin, so what, if I dozed off in the theatre!" Avani yelled at Jaimin outside the theatre.

"Avani, I am not just talking about the theatre. I always feel that you are not with me. Whenever we talk, you tend to blank-out. Whenever we hang out, you tend to space-out. I don't expect much but at least a small gesture of love. Do you remember how I threw a grand party for your birthday? But on my birthday, you didn't even call to wish me."

"First, I did not ask you to throw that party. Second, on the day of your birthday, my father was hospitalised. How could you be so heartless?"

She had a huge fight with Jaimin. In the evening, she played online games to cool down and then sent a game request to Neil.

-----τβπ-----

The next morning, when she was talking to Neil while watching the sunrise, she received a call from Jaimin. She saw his name on the screen but ignored it. Then, she received a love message from Jaimin.

She felt guilty, so she made an excuse before Neil. “Listen, I have to go for a dance class.”

After disconnecting Neil’s call, she dialled Jaimin’s number.

“Good morning,” Jaimin greeted her.

Avani was still upset with him so she didn’t respond.

“What happened?”

“Have you forgotten that we had a fight yesterday?”

“Exactly, we had a fight yesterday. Let the past Jaimin and the past Avani handle it.”

-----τβπ-----

At the wedding of Arun, after his disappearance, Avani and Pia were helping Rinichi to put on her lehenga.

“Now, I get why you asked me to mix those loose motion pills in Jaimin’s drink,” Pia said.

“What are you saying?” Rinichi asked.

“Ask her,” Pia said, pointing at Avani.

“Nothing,” Avani said, giving a golden necklace to Rinichi.

“Don’t you know why Neil has come over here?” Pia asked.

Avani gave a quizzical look.

“He is going to propose to you.”

Rinichi laughed.

“What happened?” Pia asked.

“Good joke,” Rinichi said, wearing the golden necklace. “Why will Neil propose to her? Doesn’t he know that Avani loves Jaimin?”

“Neil has fallen in love with her,” Pia said, tucking her hair behind her ear.

Rinichi argued, “So what? That’s his problem. And how can you compare him with Jaimin? Just look at Jaimin and his personality. He is smart, tall and well educated. He comes from a well-settled business family. Avani looks perfect with him. And look at Neil.”

“But you said you liked Neil,” Pia defended.

“Yeah, I like him but that doesn’t mean that he is good for Avani. And there is a huge difference between love and like. In love, respect between partners is important. Look at Avani and her achievements. She is going to the US for further studies and what is this guy- Neil doing? Got into an engineering college after three attempts. What is his CGPA? Five-point something. He doesn’t even know what he wants in life. That guy doesn’t know how to respect himself, how can Avani respect him? And if she can’t respect him, how can she love him?”

Avani was concerned.

-----τβπ-----

After rejecting Neil’s proposal, Avani called Pia and asked her to meet up. She told her everything that happened at the railway station.

“Idiot, why did you listen to Rinichi? You know she has a habit of blabbering nonsense.”

“Yeah, but she was right.”

“Since, when did you start calculating?”

She was baffled.

“You know, what I like the most about you? You never measure a relationship. In this world where everyone has a selfish motive, your friendship comes without that burden. It’s pure. But you have proven me wrong.”

“What should I do then?”

“I think you should give him a call.”

She dialled his number but he didn’t pick up.

“He dodged my call.”

“What else did you expect? You destroyed his self-respect.”

But then, she received a call but it was from Jaimin. Pia peeked into her mobile and said, “I think you should finish this chapter first before proceeding ahead.”



## 9. Stay Freely

Neil called Chinu when he was on the train.

“Bhai, I am not coming to Jodhpur.”

“Kaminey, you always fool me.” Chinu was exasperated and mocked, “Next year, we will definitely go to Leh-Ladakh. The New Year will definitely be in Goa. Lukkhe, this time I am not going to listen to any of your excuses.”

“Bhai, I am sorry. Have fun in Rajasthan,” Neil said and his voice cracked.

“What shall I do without you? Come on, yaar. This entire trip has been sponsored by our college. Why are you spoiling the fun? Please...”

“Bhai...” he sobbed.

“What happened?”

“You were right. Avani...she...” he choked, bursting into tears.

“Shit! No need to say anything. I got it. Just come back.”

-----τβπ-----

With a sinking feeling, Neil returned to NIT, Surat. When he entered the hostel room, he started sobbing and fell into Chinu’s arms.

In the evening, Baba brought Manchurian and Chowmein for Neil. He knew his gyaan would be of no use at that juncture so he spoke a little and diverted his attention by gossiping on irrelevant topics. Baba assured Neil that if he ever needed him for anything at any time, he would be there for him. Before going to class, Baba hinted that he shouldn’t take any stupid step like the one he took at Goa. After Baba left, he finished Manchurian and Chowmein and retired to bed.

At night, a nightmare jolted him awake. He was sweating profusely. Rubbing his eyes, he rose to his feet. Chinu was snoring. He raised the speed of the fan and strode out of their room for fresh air. It was dark but he was hungry. In the last thirty-six hours, he had only eaten the Chinese food that Baba brought. So, he took his bicycle and rode it towards the night canteen. The entire campus was sleeping. Even the guy at the night canteen had dozed

off. He tapped to wake him up and asked him to prepare one plate of Maggi and a cup of tea. Though he was starving, he had no desire to eat. His conversation with Avani kept attacking his mind. He left the plate half-eaten and steered the bicycle towards the entrance gate. The guards were asleep. He didn't disturb them. He sat on the pavement stretching his legs and gazed into the night sky. Thoughts laced with pain were hitting his heart.

Chinu was right that the relationship was bound to end like that. Avani had made it clear enough that she would be going out of India for her higher studies. Considering that, he kept his distance from the beginning. While proposing, even he knew that the answer might be unfavourable. Then, why was his heart aching so much? He contemplated. Was it the attack on his self-esteem? Maybe she had pressed on a deep cut from his past. His oldest wounds. Scars given by his father were open again. She shouldn't have done that. After a lot of effort, he had come to terms with that. But, that was bound to bounce back, wasn't it? She was right. Why would she love a guy like him? When even he didn't respect himself, why was he expecting the same from her?

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He returned to his room and darted a glance at his broken guitar. Though he loved music, he knew in the first year that it wasn't his call. He gazed at the poster of the HALO game that hung above his bed. Even Avani beat him at the video game that he designed. Video gaming wasn't for him. His eyes turned towards his books. Maybe he could give a shot at his studies.

At 9 am, he got ready and reached class. The lecturer came late by five minutes. It took him ten minutes to start the computer and another fifteen minutes to operate the projector. In the next half an hour, he made two scientific mistakes while teaching Geomatics Surveying and fumbled thrice on asking doubts. Neil's spirits dampened. This was not how he would make his future in engineering.

However, in the next lecture, Professor Kitanu came. He started scribbling on the board. Then, he explained the building structures of the Indus valley civilization. It seemed interesting to Neil but when the professor took forward the discussion on the design of aqueducts, everything bounced off his mind. He realised that he had a lot of catching up to do. It wasn't difficult but was he ready to put that much effort?

In the evening, he went to the Sports Activity Centre. He tried his hands at badminton but sprained his wrist on hitting an underarm backhand stroke. On the way to the hostel, he saw Picasso Saab clicking photos of insects and leaves. He thought that finally he had found his calling. Photography seemed easy to him. One just had to adjust and click.

“How much does a camera cost?” Neil asked.

“It depends,” Picasso said.

“On what?”

“The cost of the camera depends on features like aperture, shutter speed, sensor size...”

Neil tuned out and started walking towards his room like an old man.

The first thing he did when he reached to his room was to dig out a hidden stock of liquor and weed. He made the best use of the high-quality paper of the annual magazine. Its tagline was ‘More than just a *Bhel Puri wrap*’. It indeed was.

-----τβπ-----

A week later, smoke was coming out from the gap under their door, Baba stormed into his room. Neil sat on the floor. His eyes were red and his hair was ruffled. Baba wasn’t anxious but furious now.

“Dude, what is this nonsense? You have a viva tomorrow. If you show up like this, they will rape you.”

“*Dasho mat, Baba* (Don’t pester me, Baba)! I am under a lot of stress. *Toota dil sambhalu yaa phuta dimaag* (What should I handle- my broken heart or my exploding brain)? Please let me relax.”

“You are proving her right, aren’t you?”

Baba’s expression was icy.

“What should I do then? I am a loser! She doesn’t love me because I am not good enough for her. My father looked down upon me because I couldn’t get into IIT. I am a useless pig.”

“F\*ck you! You, a self-loathing lazy piece of ass! F\*ck you! She is right. You don’t deserve her at all. You are good for nothing,” Baba blurted

out.

“I have tried everything, Baba. I am not good at anything.”

“I hate you, bastard! I hate you,” Baba raised his voice. “I hate you for giving stupid excuses. You, sissy bastard. You only know how to crib but do nothing. How can you give up so easily? Do you know how an eight pointer, like me, brawled with nine pointers to crack the Google interview? You have to bust your ass to claim what you want.”

“It’s easier for you to say when you have figured out what you want.”

“Dude, you are not going to find that by puffing away or handshaking. It doesn’t knock on your door. You have to self-introspect for that. But, why would you worry about it? You won’t find it at all. You know why?” Neil gazed at him inquisitively. Baba continued, “You are scared of busting your ass. You don’t have the determination. You bought a guitar but the moment it seemed tough, you just gave up. You tried badminton but a wrist sprain made you lose the racquet. Chess is out of syllabus for you. You only have excuses but aren’t ready for real hard work. You aren’t ready for making sacrifices. You aren’t ready to struggle for anything in life. You know what I did for my dream job. I organised a game event, the Clean India Drive...”

“Blood Donation Drive, became a member of the natural club, filed a patent on a design of bio-toilet...” quipped Chinu.

“Shut your goddamn mouth! I did whatever I could to get my dream job. When you cook food, you have to clean dishes even if you don’t like to. But both of you aren’t ready to clean dishes in life. F\*ck everything. You are here for getting an engineering degree so that you can get a decent job. What are you doing for that? Nothing! Are you doing your assignments? Are you preparing for your exams or viva? No, you aren’t. Everybody wants to eat delicious food but nobody wants to clean the dishes.”

“Baba, that’s not true.”

“Then, give me this joint,” Baba said and extended his hand.

“Baba, please...” Neil pleaded.

“*Avani ki kasam* (For Avani).”

Neil grudgingly handed it over to him.

-----τβπ-----

As advised by Pia, Avani wanted to close the Jaimin's chapter before moving on ahead. So, she asked him to meet her at the Havmor Ice-cream joint. It was a difficult task but she had to let Jaimin know about her feelings. She didn't know how he would react but she had to face the storm.

Jaimin had arrived before their scheduled time. He pulled out a chair for her. She resisted but he did it nevertheless. Then, he walked across the table.

"I couldn't believe it when you called me. You know, this is for the first time that you have picked a place and chosen a time for our date," Jaimin said, settling in his chair. She realised that it wasn't going to be an easy task.

"Jaimin, please," she said.

"Sorry, but I couldn't contain my joy."

This was turning out to be harder than Avani thought but she had firmly decided to break the news.

"Jaimin, I want to tell you something," Avani said.

Jaimin's phone buzzed but he cancelled it.

"Sorry!"

Avani cleared her throat and took a sip of water.

His phone rang again. Jaimin asked for her apology and picked it up. His face turned cheerful while talking on the phone. When the phone conversation ended, he clutched her shoulders and said, "You won't believe what has happened."

"What happened?"

"I got into IIM Lucknow."

"Wow! That's awesome news."

Avani feigned excitement. Jaimin embraced her tightly. She looked perplexed.

-----τβπ-----

Outside the laboratory, Neil waited for Chinu. He arrived with their copies of laboratory journal.

“Are our journals completed?” Neil asked.

“Of course, they are. Like the juniors had a choice. They want to survive over here.”

“Let’s go inside. Kitanu’s *chamche* will be waiting for us.”

They stepped into the laboratory. Their classmates had already occupied their seats. Due to a low budget of their college, lecturers were imposed with the responsibilities of lab co-ordinators too. The lecturer that taught Geomatics Surveying addressed the students and asked them to pick a piece of paper from a bowl for the final practical exam. Neil was lucky that the practical exam was being carried out in a group. That absolved him of his yesterday’s sins.

He allowed the group to perform the practical and sat in the corner. There is always one enthusiastic member in every group who always saves the ass of entire group. And there should be only one or there would be dissonance among the members leading to a disaster.

The lecturers were inside the cabin going through the journals. They just flipped the pages to check the presence of blue ink on each paper and then signed on the last page. It took less than five minutes to sign all the journals. The rest of the time was spent on whatsapping and facebooking.

An hour later, when all the students were done with their practical, they waited frantically for their turn of viva. Panic had spread among the students. A huge discussion was going on. Engineers aren’t afraid to fight at the LOC border but a viva is an atom bomb for them. Even the most studious Chaatu fumbles during a viva.

“I never get this. These jokers know nothing when they are teaching in the class. But as soon as they start taking viva, they become Einstein,” Chinu said.

“Yaar, my head is pounding hard. Wake me up when my turn comes,” Neil said, burying his head in his arms.

“Dude, same case here. My head is spinning since this morning. My

mouth is dry. My eyes are puffy and swollen. Your heart is broken but I have become the Devdas here.”

The peon called for Neil. All eyes turned towards him in bewilderment.

“Your name starts with N, so how could they call you so early?”

“How would I know?”

“Wait!” Chinu opened a bag of a girl sitting beside him, took out a pack of her sanitary pads and threw at him. “Take this!”

The girl glared at Chinu, snatched the pack and hit him with it. Neil showed the middle finger to Chinu and walked away.

-----τβπ-----

If one has ever attended a viva then he knows that the scene of the viva is not very different from that of a police interrogation. One lecturer acts as a good cop – pretending to be concerned about you but enjoys witnessing your rape at the hand of the other lecturer (a bad cop).

“Good morning, sir,” Neil greeted, occupying a seat.

“Very good morning,” the good cop greeted him with extra affection.

“So, Neil, which is your favourite subject?” the bad cop asked.

Neil was nervous.

“Sir, sir... DS.”

The full form of DS is Design of Structures.

“How much did you score in DS?” the bad cop asked.

“Sir, 17 out of 25.”

“But here is your mark sheet. It shows that you have scored 7 marks in Design of Structures.”

“Oh, sorry! In Design of Structures, I scored only 7. I thought you asked for Geomatics Surveying. Sir, I had studied for GS on the day of DS.”

“Wasn’t GS the first exam paper?”

Neil smiled nervously.

The good cop said, “Good, very good. Then you will have good knowledge of GS. Tell us about the different methods to get DEM?”

“Sir,...” Neil mumbled.

“Wait! First of all, tell us the full form of DEM?” the bad cop interrupted.

“Sir,...sir,...” Neil mumbled, “I...know...that...”

Neil pretended to think hard but couldn’t recall the full form of DEM (Digital Elevation Model).

“Okay! Don’t worry, tell us, what is contour?” the good cop asked.

“Sir, the counter is used for counting...”

The bad cop threw a ball pen on the table and shouted, “Chomu, counting what? Marbles or your brain cells?”

“Don’t worry, he may have forgotten that. Tell us, how GPS works?” the good cop asked.

However, the bad cop interrupted, “No need to answer that, even my nephew who is in the seventh class knows that.”

Neil thanked God because he didn’t know the principle behind the working of GPS.

“Then, ask him on today’s practical. I mean, he just did that experiment, right?” the good cop suggested.

“Yeah! Tell me how do you present terrain surface?”

Neil faltered again, “Sir, it is...Sir, it is...”

He mumbled for a while and then confessed, “Sorry, sir, I am not aware of that.”

The bad cop’s nose twisted as though he had inhaled a fart.

“You tell us. What can we ask you? What are your strong subjects?” he asked.

“Sir, I am good at CAD and Animation...”



“Draw my dick,” the bad cop blurted out.

“Sorry, sir?”

“You heard me.”

“Sir, sir...”

“I said-draw it. Damn it! Do you want to pass the viva or not?”

“Dude, let it be. He is a good chap,” the good cop intervened.

“No, it is not okay. How can these idiots fill such a derogatory feedback form?” the bad cop whipped out a feedback form from a drawer and read it. “Lecturer salivates while teaching the witches of the first bench. Always waste half the lecture in puking on a projector. Shits in his pants if he is asked a doubt. Sucks! Lecturer sucks! He is only better at sucking his own peanut dick.”

The good cop asked, “Neil, who wrote this feedback?”

“Sir, I didn’t write it.”

“Then, who did it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Tell us, who did it?” the bad cop yelled, leaping to his feet.

“Sir, I was absent last week,” Neil said.

The bad cop lost his patience and raised his voice, “*Suvar*, I know that very well. You are hardly seen in the class but have 100 percent attendance. You are only seen during exams, viva and submission. But I bet that you know for sure who drew that.”

“Submission! Sir, you can compare the handwriting in the feedback form with that of journals. If it matches...Bam...you will find your culprit,” Neil suggested.

The bad cop’s lips parted in a wicked grin.

“I love this kid.”

Neil gave a nervous smile. They lifted the journal copies from the floor and placed them on the table.

“You may go now.”

Neil rose to his feet and dashed out.

When he entered the laboratory area, his classmates surrounded him and inquired about the viva questions.

“It’s easy. They are asking questions about today’s practical only. Don’t worry. They know nothing.”

Chinu separated him from the crowd and dragged him to their seats. The girl beside them slipped a lip balm into her bag, gave a frown look and whirled around but listened intently.

“Why did they call you first?”

“Some rascal has drawn his peanut on the feedback form and has written some shameful vulgar stuff. They are hunting that bastard.”

“Shit!”

Chinu was nervous.

“Shit! Are you the one?”

“I am screwed.”

“Don’t worry; they are comparing the handwriting with that of the journals.”

The good cop appeared and called the peon.

“Yes, sir,” the peon responded.

“Bring the midterm papers of Design of Structures from my locker.”

The girl whipped out a pack of sanitary pads from her bag and threw it over Chinu, flashing a smirk.

-----τβπ-----

Baba guffawed at the plight of Chinu. Neil also sniggered along with Baba.

“Lukkhe, you will pay for this,” Chinu said while throwing books into a carton.

“Yaar, how is it my fault?” Neil asked, winding up the extension cord.

It was the last day for Baba in the campus. Exams were over. Neil and Chinu were helping him in packing his stuff.

“Who gave the idea of comparing the handwritings to them?” Chinu retorted

“Lecturers are not of Adam’s era. During their college days, they too would have got their journals completed by their juniors only,” Baba asserted, slipping a laptop into his bag.

When they finished the packing, Neil carried his bag and placed it outside his room. Baba looked around his room for the last time and got emotional for leaving the campus. He embraced Chinu and Neil. His eyes were moist.

“I didn’t want to come here then, but now I don’t want to leave.”

“Baba, we will be here for the next year. You can visit us anytime.”

Baba released them.

“The college is just an excuse. I will miss you, guys.”

“There are still three months before your stint at Google. Why don’t you stay with us in Mumbai?” Neil suggested.

“Are you sure?”

“*Laat khayega* (Shall I kick you)!” Chinu quipped.

-----τβπ-----

Pia slapped Avani lightly and cursed her when she narrated her failed attempt to break-up.

“You should have told him,” Pia said, stuffing her mouth with samosa dipped in watery ketchup.

“How could I do that? He got into IIM Lucknow. It was the best day of his life. How could I destroy it?”

“Listen, the Lucknow news is as stale as this samosa,” she said, spitting out the piece of samosa on a tissue paper. “Jaimin is coming over here. Tell him everything. You will never get a better chance than this.”

Jaimin arrived there in a jovial mood. Pia made a lame excuse for some work and left them alone. But before leaving, she gestured with her eyes to take action.

Avani asked Jaimin to sit.

“Jaimin, I meant to share something.”

“Oh, I forgot! You called me to the Havmor joint for that. So silly of me. Okay, I am all ears.”

“There is this thing. I didn’t want it to happen but it happened. It isn’t my fault or yours. But I was helpless.”

Jaimin was listening attentively. But, the conversation was interrupted by a ringtone of his phone. He cancelled it.

“Sorry, you were saying?”

“You are getting what I meant to say, right...”

The phone buzzed again.

He switched it off and said, “Don’t worry; this won’t disturb us anymore.”

“It’s fine.”

“Okay, tell me.”

“You have no idea how much difficult this is for me. I thought a lot about it. But if I don’t tell you, it will...”

This time, her phone was ringing. His lips parted into a grin.

“It’s your friend Ajay. I guess it must be urgent.”

She gave her phone to Jaimin.

He cursed Ajay for calling him but when Ajay revealed the urgency, his jovial mood vanished. The smile disappeared. When he put down the call, fat tears emerged from the corner of his eyes.

“What happened?” Avani asked.

“My grandma! She just had a cardiac arrest.”

## 10. Kasturi

For their summer internship, Neil and Chinu went to Mumbai and rented an apartment. The next morning, they went to the corporate building of AOL Games.

All interns were waiting outside the CTO office. Mr Vinay Jaju, aged 37, was yelling at one of his employees. He snatched a paper from his subordinate, wiped his ass with it and threw it on their faces.

“This is shit! Get out!”

The subordinate came out with tearful eyes. Vinay Jaju saw the group of interns, so he signalled them to come inside. Everyone was scared but Neil stepped forward boldly.

When everyone settled in their seats, he gave a presentation on their upcoming game ‘*Alien Attack*’ and ended it in his corporate style.

“All of you have gotten once in a lifetime opportunity of working on this live project ‘*Alien Attack*’. Make the best use of your time over here. We will meet again in the second half. Meanwhile, the HR lady will guide you through the documentation process.”

-----τβπ-----

In the conference room, all interns were busy filling up and signing a pile of papers.

“Yaar, how many forms do I have to fill up? Have I come here for the internship or for my wedding? Full of crap! I feel I will achieve enlightenment right here. Rishi-munis are stupid for going to the Himalayas in the search for truth. Ask them to fill out one of these forms. Introduction, strength and weakness are okay but what kind of question is this?”

Neil was in a gloomy state but still, he looked up and asked, “What happened?”

“This question- when have you faced crisis and what have you learned from it? Mummy caught me watching porn once and I learnt that one should always keep the door closed.”

Neil gave a faint smile.

“Are you okay?”

Neil nodded.

“How long will you yearn for her, dude?”

“I am fine.”

“I know what will cheer you up.”

Chinu seized his hands and pulled him.

“Dude, I am not interested in a drag.”

“No, we are not going for that.”

“Then?” Neil thought that he was suggesting for a drink, “Dude, no! Today is our first day. If we are caught drunk, they will not spare us.”

“Dude, do you think I am that stupid?”

“Then?”

“Come with me.”

Neil resisted but followed him.

“Where are we going?”

Chinu opened the door and dragged him into a large room. Neil’s eyes opened wide seeing several hexagonal chambers in the polygonally shaped room, illuminated by the unique use of recessed lighting in the ceiling as well as accent spotlights. In each room, five enormous HD screens adorned the wall. Each screen had a dedicated game console operated by a wireless game controller. There was a black comfortable chair with a dedicated headphone to ensure fully immersive gaming experience.

Chinu went to the counter and bought a bunch of tokens for Neil. Each token bought half an hour on each of the machines.

“*Jo bhi khunnas hai naa sab nikaal de yahaan* (Dude, take out all your frustration over here),” Chinu said and left.

Neil inserted a token in one of the game consoles and selected the game ‘Call of Duty’.

How would a child react if left in a toy shop? How would Marwari or Gujju feel if he found a hundred rupee note under his bed? How would a *bevda* (alcoholic) behave if left in a free bar? How would a ravenous glutton attack a *chhappan pakwan* (a buffet meal)? Only Neil knew at that moment.

-----τβπ-----

Later that evening, Chinu came and stood behind him. Neil was so engrossed in the game that he didn't notice Chinu's presence. The chaotic explosion and arbitrary shooting of the enemy had stopped now. He strategically planned out and attacked his targets. Since it was getting late, Chinu tapped on his back. Neil was startled instinctively but on seeing Chinu heaved a sigh.

"When did you come?" Neil asked, pressing the pause button.

"About half an hour ago," Chinu said and looked at the time on his watch. It was a quarter to ten.

Neil took out the headphone and gave him a thoughtful glance.

"What happened?" Chinu asked.

Neil leaned in to embrace him and said, "I will be always grateful to you for bringing me here. I have decided that we shall..."

-----τβπ-----

Neil pulled a whiteboard and scribbled '*KASTURI*' on the board. He shared his idea of updating their game project idea. He wanted to reinvent the game that they had designed for a tech project. To design unique animation and add special VFX, he charted out a detailed plan and an execution strategy. They turned their hall room into an office and their dining table into their workstation.

They had a strict timeline for the execution of the project. All of them would wake up at 6 am and after the daily morning routine, they would start working from 7 to 11 am. Neil and Chinu then left for their internship and reached the office by 12 pm and worked there until 8 pm. Between 12 pm to 8 pm, Baba would arrange his meetings with vendors, freelancers, sponsors and other third parties. At night, all of them would gather for dinner at the local restaurant and resume their work after 9 pm. Before sleeping, they would play video games for an hour to refresh themselves.

In Jaipur, Avani also played their game and remembered Neil. Before sleeping, she would visit his profile on FB. She missed him very much but didn't have the courage to dial his number. Though she was with Jaimin, she was very distant from him. There wasn't any fault of his. And that was making it harder for her to dump him. All the tricks of books were used. Sometimes, she cursed herself for being so selfish.

Neil had started using a nicotine patch. He missed her but didn't show it to Baba and Chinu. Though they knew about it, they wouldn't bring it up either. Neil often watched the movie '*Rockstar*' to soothe his longing.

To prove that he had passion in his life, he gave everything to the game. By the end of the month, their room walls were covered with sticky notes, posters and diagrams. The whiteboards were painted red, green and blue. Also, his dedication at AOL Games was commendable. Jaju sir gave his ears to his recommendations.

-----τβπ-----

Avani invited Jaimin to the *Fresh Beans* café.

"Listen, we need to talk," Avani initiated the conversation as both of them settled on the chairs.

"Okay. Tell me, what happened?"

"Give your phone to me first."

She didn't want any external disturbance but the waiter came over to take the order.

"What shall I order for you? Cappuccino or Espresso?" Jaimin asked.

"I have stopped drinking coffee," she said bluntly.

"Then, why did you invite me over..."

He stopped abruptly as he deciphered the meaning behind her words.

"This is very hard for me. You are a great guy. There is nothing wrong with you. But, it's me..."

"Avani, stop here. Don't! What's bothering you?"

"Jaimin, don't make it harder for me."



“Whatever it is, we will work it out.”

“I am going to the US, you know. I want to focus on my career and my passion.”

“I understand. How much time do you need? One year, two years or five years? I will wait for you.”

“You aren’t getting my point, Jaimin.”

“Tell me, I am all ears.”

“Please Jaimin, no more questions. Let me go without any baggage,” Avani sobbed.

“But, Avani...”

Avani’s eyes were filled with tears. Jaimin kept looking at her. A heavy silence sank down on them.

-----τβπ-----

“Shall I press ENTER?” Baba asked.

“Done!” Neil and Chinu exclaimed simultaneously, gesturing a thumbs up.

“There will be no turning back after this point,” Baba warned.

Chinu pressed his finger. Baba responded with an ear to ear grin and sprang to his feet. They hugged each other in joy. Their game was put live on the net. They celebrated the launch by cutting a cake and grooving on a club number.

They had shared the download link of the game on all social media platforms and sent it to all their friends and acquaintances.

Though they hadn’t slept for two nights, nobody felt sleepy.

“Baba, I have one big news to share. I am dropping out from the college,” Neil said, putting a piece of cake in his mouth.

“I am also thinking of rejecting the Google offer.”

“No, Baba! I can’t allow that. Don’t reject the offer.”

“I have made up my mind.”

“People kill for Google. Don’t be crazy!”

“I am not crazy.”

“It is your dream job. You have made thousands of sacrifices for securing this job.”

“And hundreds of sacrifices by us,” Chinu mumbled slowly.

“Bhai, I have thought it through. We will build our own Google.”

“Baba, what about the safe and secure life? Why are you betting on us? Don’t be emotional. You don’t have to prove your friendship to us. You can always join us later.”

“And miss the amazing journey. No chance.”

“Baba?”

“Listen, the thrill that we had over the last two months while designing this game was out of this world. The adrenaline rush, the kick, I can’t put it into words. I know there will be challenges but if you and Chinu are by my side then I am ready to face any challenge.”

“Chinu, he is being stupid. Please tell him,” Neil said.

“Baba, this bastard wants to take away the entire credit.”

Neil stared at Chinu. The support of friends at such a critical moment was a blessing for him.

“Thanks, bhai,” Neil said and wrapped his arms around Chinu tightly.

“Hey, dude! Stay away from me. I am straight.”

Neil squeezed him harder.

“*Baba, bachao mujhe is balatkaari se* (Baba, please save me from this rapist).”

However, Baba jumped on Chinu and hugged him tightly.

-----τβπ-----

The launch event of ‘*Alien Attack*’ was organized simultaneously across the globe. In India, it was held at NSCI DOME, Mumbai. Thousands of people across the country attended the event. Competitions of their

previous games were held. Game enthusiasts were invited to explore the new game '*Alien Attack*'. Legends of the gaming industries graced the event. A salsa dance group enthralled the audience with their amazing performance. The famous cricketer Viraj Kothi was signed as the brand ambassador for the company. Heralded by loud drumbeats, he entered the stadium and then inaugurated the event. The Indian CEO took the stage and unveiled the fantastic teaser of the game. Then, he handed over the stage to the CTO Vinay Jaju who demonstrated the unique features of the game. He captivated the audience with his astonishing oratory skills. It was the most spectacular event in the history of the company.

After the completion of the event, a group of interns surrounded Vinay Jaju, trying to butter him up but he was too smart to fall for that. When all of them scattered out for the dinner, he asked Neil to stay back.

“Neil, we are highly impressed by your work and ideas. Well done.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Would you like to work for us?” Jaju sir said, handing him the offer letter. Neil smiled and shook his head negatively.

“Sir, thanks for the offer, but after a lot of trouble, I have found my way. I don’t want to get distracted.”

“Just see the offer once. I am sure, you won’t regret.”

Just then, Chinu appeared there. He was panting.

“Dany!”

Neil and Jaju sir stared at him inquisitively.

“She is here, playing the game.”

Neil turned to Jaju sir. “Sir, please excuse me.”

-----τβπ-----

They hurried to the event zone, looked around but could not find her. Chinu went to the control room and scanned the live video feed.

Neil went to the game zone area and searched for her. Chinu called and told Neil the machine number. He looked around and located the machine but was disappointed to find someone else on it.

“Avani isn’t here.”

“But I have seen her on CCTV.”

“You might be mistaken.”

“Let me check the footage of the last half an hour.”

“Leave it, yaar.”

Neil punched a fist into his other hand in frustration.

“Dude, don’t be disappointed. If she is here, we will find her.”

“If she is here and interested in meeting me, she will call me. Else I will think that...”

Avani appeared before him. His heart started beating wildly.

“Hi, Neil! How are you?” she greeted him.

“Avani!” Neil said and hung up the call.

Neil stretched out his right hand and asked, “How are you?”

She shook his hand.

Both of them didn’t know how to start the conversation after the last embarrassing fight.

“The game is good.”

“Thanks.”

Again, silence fell between them.

“Would you like to drink coffee?” Neil offered by gesturing a drinking signal. For a moment, Jaimin’s gesture for coffee flashed before her.

“I have heard tea is awesome over here.”

-----τβπ-----

While trudging towards the cafeteria, Neil examined her. Her dark auburn hair was tied back in a knot with a few loose strands hanging near her eyes. She flaunted a smokey eyeshadow, comprising shades of black and grey, and a mad magenta coloured lipstick. A bit of bronzer on her fair complexion elevated her beautiful looks. She had worn a pink-coloured saree

laced in an intricate golden embroidery work. Bangles and anklets tinkled while she walked beside him. It seemed that she had arrived for a wedding.

Neil couldn't take away his eyes from her twinkling bindi. She raised her eyebrows.

"I am sorry." He turned his eyes away and then said, "It wasn't necessary to dress so much for this event."

Avani flashed a smile. It was impossible to stay mad at her.

"There was a wedding."

"I hope, not yours!"

-----τβπ-----

"I can't believe you are opting for an arranged marriage. I mean, of all the boys and the girls, I know of, I couldn't even imagine that you would marry a guy of your parent's choice," Avani said.

"Why? What is the problem with an arranged marriage?"

"Nothing, but I thought..."

"Because I have dated a few boys in the past?" Pia asked.

"A few?"

"Don't be judgemental."

"I am not judgemental. But haven't you found a single good guy with whom you could spend the rest of your life?"

"All were spineless monkeys. I guess I was unlucky."

"Okay, tell me, what are the characteristics of your ideal partner?"

"Tall, caring, soft-spoken..."

"Good looking, blah, blah..."

"*Nai*, I am fine if he is average looking but he should be rich."

"Rich?" Avani raised her eyebrows.

"Don't be judgemental. If a guy selects a girl on the basis of her looks, then it's fine but if a girl peeks a little into his bank balance, then the world

loses its sleep. Don't we have the right to look for financial stability?"

"Okay, *meri maa!* You win. Please forgive me for judging you. Now, can we please go inside and find out Rinichi's problem?"

They were outside Rinichi's room. Avani raised her hand to knock on the door.

However before she could knock, Rinichi swung it open for them.

"Why are you discussing outside the room? Come inside."

"What happened? Why did you ask us to appear so urgently?"

"There is a big problem," Rinichi said and guided them into her room.

"Congrats! The first baby of the group," Pia exclaimed and raised her hands to embrace Rinichi.

"Shut up!" Rinichi dodged her away and gave a frown look.

"Then, what's the problem?" Avani asked.

They perched on the edge of Rinichi's bed.

"A guy is coming to see me," Rinichi said.

"Arranged marriage! But how could you? I mean, you are married to Amancha," Avani said.

"Thanks for telling me that. I wasn't aware of it," Rinichi said.

"Rinichi!"

"I am very much stressed out."

"Exactly!" Rinichi exclaimed.

"Where is Amancha?" Avani asked.

"After exams, he went to Leh-Ladakh with his guy friends. I tried calling him but his phone is unreachable."

"Forget him. If this guy is wealthier and smarter than Amancha, then dump Amancha and marry him," Pia winked.

"Will you shut your goddamn mouth? *Phati padi hai meri* (I am scared)."

While they were having the discussion, Rinichi's mother entered the room. She was clad in a dark blue Parsi Gara silk sari.

"Zarine, beta, the boy's family has arrived. Why aren't you ready yet?"

"Mummy, I need to tell you something," Rinichi said.

His father dashed into the room and asked impatiently, "Why isn't she ready yet? Bring her quickly. They are waiting for her."

"Mummy!"

Her mother picked up a dupatta from the table and gave it to her.

"Don't worry, they are our close friends. You wear this over your head and come."

-----τβπ-----

Rinichi was nervous but she entered the hall area carrying a tray of tea and coffee like an ideal shy bride-to-be. She had covered her head with a dupatta to respect her mother's word. Pia and Avani stayed at the door. They peeked to see the face of groom but couldn't as his back was facing them.

She placed the tray in the centre of the table and served tea to the groom's uncle and aunty. Then, Rinichi picked up a cup of tea for the groom and turned to give it to him.

She was stunned to see the groom. First, she was relaxed but then donned a frowning expression. Her parents were sniggering. The groom's uncle and aunty burst into a roguish laughter. Pia and Avani came forward.

Rinichi started punching Amancha on his shoulder and broke down. He sprang to his feet and held her in his arms.

-----τβπ-----

"Once again," Neil said shockingly and demonstrated the act of wearing garlands.

"Twice."

"What!"

"A fat Ismalic wedding and a Parsi wedding."

“Get out!”

She nodded, flashing a smile.

“Really!” Neil exclaimed.

The tension between them was eased down. Neil was playing with a food token. She took a sip of water and then said, “Listen, I should not have said all those things that day.”

“It’s fine. Anyway, those words did have a deep impact on me.”

“I said sorry, naa?”

“No, no...I am saying that they have a positive outcome. Wait, I want to show you something.”

Neil opened his mobile to show her their game.

“I have played Kasturi. You have done a good job but I guess you can improve it further.”

The last line pinched him a bit but he composed himself.

“I used your project concept. Same things rearrange in a different fashion to give different perceptions. I guess unpredictability will make it more interesting.”

She nodded her head and looked at him.

“Sixty-nine,” the counter boy announced.

“I think that is our order.”

“What is our number?” Avani asked.

“Sixty...” Neil stopped. His lips parted into a grin.

“Give me five minutes,” he said and rose from his seat to collect the order from the food counter.

Avani turned her eyes to the TV screen. ‘*Biwi No. 1*’ was being telecasted. The protagonist of the movie took his dog for a walk but went to his girlfriend’s house instead.

-----τβπ-----



“Avani!”

She turned back. And to her surprise, Jaimin appeared before her.

“What are you doing here?”

“Avani, I can’t live without you. Please don’t leave me.”

“Jaimin, we agreed to part ways. Don’t make this difficult for me,” Avani said and rose to her feet.

“Just tell me, what should I do to make things right between us? Please tell me how have I hurt you? I deserve to know the reason at least.”

“I told you. It’s not you, it’s me. Please try to understand.”

Jaimin got down on his knees and begged, “Avani, please! I will do anything. Please!”

And just then, Neil arrived with the plate of food.

“Dude, what happened?” he asked, placing the plate on the table.

Jaimin turned and asked, “Who are you?”

“Who are you?” Neil asked and looked at Avani.

Jaimin asked Avani, “Who is he?”

Avani glanced at both of them and collapsed into her seat.

“Do you know this guy?” Neil asked Avani. She raised her eyes and looked at Jaimin.

“I am the most horrible person on this planet. I have played with the sentiments of both of you...” She pointed at Neil, “Jaimin, he is the reason behind our breakup,” and then she pointed at Jaimin, “Neil, he is my ex-boyfriend.”

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“Avani, *yeh sab kya siyapa hai* (What kind of stupidity is this)? You don’t want to be with Jaimin because you don’t love him. You love Neil but you can’t be with him because that will be like cheating Jaimin,” Pia yelled at Avani when they were at the international airport. It was Avani’s last day in India. Her last conversation with Neil and Jaimin was brutal for everyone.

She thought it was better to leave the country.

“Once you asked me why I am scared of forming a new relationship. I will let you into the darkest chapter of my life. You know why did I leave my previous school? I was deeply in love with this guy-Dhruv. But I caught him sleeping with my best friend. I know how much the heart aches when you are deceived,” Avani cried.

“But you aren’t that guy.”

“But I am doing the same thing, am I not?”

“You are just being stupid.”

“Pia, only the one who has faced the deception can understand its ache.”

“But, baby, don’t you know that you are hurting yourself!”

Avani broke into tears. Pia came forward and wrapped her arms around Avani.

“Maybe this is my punishment for being disloyal.”

Avani released herself, picked up her luggage and left for the security check.

Though the decision was tough, she had made up her mind. It was better to leave India. Maybe this was her punishment for falling in forbidden love.

Jaimin saw her departing. He was being punished for no fault of his. He swallowed the pain silently.

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Neil cried while taking bath. However, he promised that this was the last time he would do that. He had a huge responsibility towards his friends. For chasing their dream, Baba had sacrificed his dream offer. Chinu had decided to drop out of college. He couldn’t afford to slacken down now.

## **11. Noah's Ark**

They registered their company under the name of MUSK Ltd. Their last game '*Kasturi*' received bad reviews from the critics. That disturbed them for days. Their expectation of ground-breaking success was shattered. They were hugely disappointed and went into a depression mode.

One day, they met Jaju sir for advice. He asked them to embrace the harsh reality and keep on working hard instead of brooding over the cold response. Don't judge passion with money, fame or any other stupid parameters. He also shared his struggles while building AOL Games.

"Failures are the scars of an entrepreneur. It shows that you have fought a battle. Like a warrior, embrace it and be proud of it. Also, never ever forget, a true warrior never takes a hit on the same wound again."

When they emerged out of his cabin, their spirits were elevated. It was now clear to them that the journey they had embarked on wasn't an easy one. Someone had rightly said, "Rome wasn't built in a day."

They decided to put negative emotions aside and doubled their efforts and determination. They revisited their game '*Kasturi*', added some challenges and tweaked certain features. Though it didn't improve its ratings, they witnessed its popularity among the young crowd. That lifted their spirits and gave them their lost confidence. Revenue from the game was minimal since most of the game downloads were pirated. But there was a relief that the time tracker of the game indicated that the players were constantly engaged and were exploring new challenges.

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A year later, they decided that it was the time for their next project.

They assembled in the hall to discuss the idea for the next project. Baba spun on the swivelling chair while Chinu settled on a bean bag. Neil sat comfortably on the floor, stretching out his legs.

"If we want to break the market clutter then we have to design an Indian game. Grounded in Indian culture. Something that we can relate to," Chinu suggested.

"I have an idea," Neil sprang to his feet and continued, "Let's make a

game based on a *chudail* (witch) trying to save her entrapped child from a castle.”

“But, doesn’t a witch thrive on children?” Baba asked.

“Yaar, that will be the USP of the story. Trust me; it will be an awesome fantasy game based on an Indian female warrior. We will add mazes, puzzles, swordfight and magical arrows, stones, potions, weird creatures, etc. We can do so much. What do you say, Baba?”

Baba thought for a while and then responded, “But, Neil, it’s too soon to tackle such a huge project. It demands high-tech equipment and a larger team. We need huge fund for that. *Itne kam time mein itni badi udaan nahi maarni chahiye* (We shouldn’t fly so high in such a short span of time),” Baba asserted.

“Baba, *magar udenge nahi to chaand tak pahuchenge kaise* (Baba, if we don’t fly high, how will we reach the moon)?”

“What! What did you say?” Chinu asked him to repeat that.

“Nothing.”

Chinu and Baba broke into a roguish laughter.

It was perfect when Avani spoke that line. Neil couldn’t understand how he had messed up but he knew he was going to pay for it.

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They started working on the witch project. The title of the game was kept ‘VASUMATI-the brave witch’. They knew very well that they would require funds to pull off such a huge project. Jaju sir helped them with the initial seed fund of 15 lakhs while Baba and Chinu borrowed 5 lakhs each from their fathers. But they knew it was peanuts to pull off such a huge project. So, they decided to prepare a teaser and an investment pitch.

The first task was to form a good team. They called their college mates and their colleagues from the summer internship program to join the project. Few of them responded but with ridiculous offers, so they had to let go. To keep the expenditure low, they distributed most of the work among themselves. However, from time to time, they took the help of freelancers and the guidance of Jaju sir.

Though the stress level was tremendously high, the passion for creativity was too intense to dip their zeal. They didn't let negativity affect the vibe of their work culture. To keep the mood of the workplace breezy, they would often pull each other's leg. Chinu was their easy target but he was a *kamina* (rascal) too. To irate Baba, Chinu would drape a bedsheet around him and pose as a sage. To remind Neil of his million dollar quote, Chinu would often play *Udi Udi Jaai* song from the movie *Raees* or dart a paper plane at him. In the presentation slide, Chinu incorporated a picture of a graveyard beside the lake in full moon.

"Is this necessary?" Neil asked, giving a frown look.

"Have you seen a witch in daylight?"

"But you will see a vampire in the daylight today," Neil quipped and clutched him.

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They had started pitching their project at various start-up conclaves. In the next six months, they had visited each and every Private Equity firm of the city. But the outcome was mostly disappointing. They also met other start-up founders for advice. All angel investors of the city were contacted. However, the project wasn't garnering enough support. Nobody was ready to invest in their company. Nevertheless, the optimism was still alive. Though there were dark days, their spirits were still high.

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For one of their investment meetings, they went to Bangalore. The pitch was going well. Investors were showing interest in the project by asking several questions. They had their fingers crossed but then a girl showed up there for two minutes. Baba and Neil felt that they had seen her somewhere but couldn't place her. She whispered something in the ears of one of the investors and left. Her brief appearance perturbed Chinu. He rushed through the pitch. Baba and Neil were startled by his behaviour. When the meeting was over, they yelled at Chinu for spoiling the good opportunity.

"Nothing was going to happen," Chinu announced.

"Why do you think so? It was going well," Baba defended.

Amidst their conversation, a female voice came from behind.

“Chandrakant!”

They turned back and saw the same girl approaching them.

“Chandrakant, please listen,” the girl said.

“Who is Chandrakant?” Baba asked. Chinu punched him on his shoulder.

In the darkness of the presentation room, Baba and Neil couldn’t put the name on her face but now, they recognised her.

Kusum extended her hand to greet them but Chinu cut her short, “Kusum, this is wrong. You shouldn’t have let your personal bias to sabotage the investment deal.”

“I let my personal bias to get the investment deal but it didn’t work. I had gone through your presentation. It actually has good prospects,” she said.

“What!”

“You mean...’

She nodded.

Baba and Neil looked at them and then at each other.

“Yaar, have you seen the dancing fountain at the entrance?” Baba asked and nudged Neil.

“Is it nice?” Neil inquired.

“Yeah, come with me. I will show you.”

“Dancing fountain? Really?” Chinu said in excitement but Neil enlarged his eyes and signalled him to stay.

After they left, Chinu and Kusum glanced at each other and smiled.

Chinu was shocked. He couldn’t make out what to say. So, Kusum spoke, “I am sorry for overreacting over the handshake incident. I was naïve at that time.”

“I am sorry for harassing you on FB. And, also, thanks for not filing any police complaint.”

They grinned.

“Apology accepted.”

Chinu leaned forward to embrace her.

“What are you doing?”

“I thought...”

“I helped you out of friendship.”

“Thanks.”

“Thanks for what?”

“People say friendship is the stepping stone to love.”

“Don’t try to flirt,” she feigned anger which Chinu figured out.

“What! I am not flirting with you.”

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The next day, Kusum dropped in their hotel room to help them with their next presentation.

“Images won’t be enough. You have to show them a minute worth of content. Since you are all techies, so I understand that you...” she stopped speaking ahead.

“Why did you stop? Criticism is always welcome,” Neil asked.

“Your presentation is too much on the technical side: on game designing and coding. For investors, what you can do is immaterial. They are concerned with how much money they are going to make. Tell them about ROI, budget, their stakes and a detailed valuation. You have to think from their angle.”

“But, we don’t know how to...”

“Don’t worry, I will help you out.”

“Thanks, Kusum. Thank you very much. I don’t know what we would have done without you,” Neil said.

“Also, very important- don’t ever beg. While negotiating, never show

your desperation. Give your presentation with panache as if you are favouring them by giving the opportunity to collaborate.”

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The next day, Kusum accompanied them to the meeting. Neil was still not confident enough for public speaking so he let Chinu lead the pitch. Baba handled other technical aspects and intervened wherever Chinu fumbled. In the end, Neil showed a teaser of the game and ended it at the slide with two words: GAME STARTS.

One of the panel members, a bald man, asked, “Every day, ten start-ups knock on our door for funding. Most of them are from reputed colleges like IITs and IIMs or have work-ex of Mckinsey, BCG or Goldman Sachs. Why should we fund a start-up idea of tier-2 College alumni and not theirs?”

Chinu was taken aback by that question. Not only were they from a tier-2 College but were dropouts too. He didn’t know what to say. Baba and Kusum were perplexed too.

But to their surprise, Neil cleared his throat and said, “Right now, I can recall one and only one quote. Experts built the Titanic which sank on its maiden voyage while an amateur built an ark that saved humanity from a great flood.”

Neil shot a glance at the bald man and then went on to explain that though they were from NIT, Surat, they had successfully designed and executed the ‘Kasturi’ project that had achieved a huge success on mobile platforms among the young crowd. He also mentioned the background of Baba and his academic achievements to add to the credibility of their team. Kusum took finance related queries and proclaimed herself as their financial and strategic advisor. Baba nodded at her self-proclamation.

After an intense gruelling for a day, the firm finally agreed to invest money in their start-up. Baba cried and hugged Neil and Chinu. They went straight to the nearest temple and bowed down in gratefulness and asked for blessings to execute the project successfully.

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Neil realised that it was the right time for him to meet Avani. Immediately, he boarded the flight to the USA and landed at her university.



He dashed to the admin office but was surprised to find Jaimin chatting with the clerk.

Jaimin gave him a cold glance. Neil ignored him too and asked the admin guy about Avani's whereabouts. But the admin guy was adamant not to share the personal details of any student. They insisted but in vain. Finally, with a gloomy face, they left the admin building.

An Indian student approached them and asked, "Are you looking for the profile details of the students?"

Neil and Jaimin nodded.

"I can hack the college system and find the required information for you."

"Will you?" Neil asked.

"But you need to pay me 100 dollars," the Indian guy said.

"What!" Neil exclaimed.

"Hundred dollars for what?" Jaimin asked.

"To hack the university database," the Indian guy responded.

"This is wrong," Jaimin said.

"Okay, fine," Neil said.

"Bloody Indians! Always ready to exploit the situation," Jaimin quipped.

Neil interrupted him and took the lead, "Give me the data."

The Indian guy was annoyed.

"Now, it will cost you 150 dollars. 50 bucks for his insightful quote."

Jaimin was going to speak more but Neil gestured to him not to utter a word.

"Keep silence! If you want to find her, then shut your mouth. Your small act just cost me 50 extra bucks," Neil shouted at Jaimin and handed 150 dollars to the Indian student. He hacked into the university data and searched for Avani Somani but couldn't find her.

“There is no student with this name.”

“Check carefully.”

He looked again but without any luck. He shook his head.

“Check the database of doctorate students.”

“I have checked the database of all batches of all streams for the last five years. Avani Somani is nowhere to be found.”

“Then, where is she?” asked a bewildered Jaimin.

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Avani worked in a chemistry lab in a far-off country. That was her penance for being in a forbidden love.

Every evening, she would return to her home by trudging on a bridge.

At her home, she would prepare *mandu* (dumpling) and eat it while watching a part of ‘*Gunda*’ movie. Later, she would sit before her laptop and play ‘Kasturi’ for long hours. The background wallpaper of her laptop was adorned by Pia, Amancha and Rinichi but her mobile screen had the photo of only one person-Neil.

Every night, before dozing off, she would browse the net to keep track of the progress of his start-up.

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After the first round of investment, they had started working on their project. Kusum helped them set up a new office. She suggested them to keep their office and home separate to inculcate discipline and a code of conduct. A single floor office was taken on rent. There were no partition walls. However, boundaries were marked on the floor to define work area of each employee.

College mates and colleagues from the summer internship program had called them to fill in the vacancy. Baba refused them humbly by citing their high CTC. He believed that a team was a critical element for the success of any company so he was involved personally in the recruitment process of each and every candidate.

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Though Neil was occupied with lots of work, his thoughts kept drifting back to Avani more often than he expected. Every night, he searched on the social media to find any traces of Avani but in vain. He started to read published papers and magazines on chemistry in the hope of finding her name. He had read so much that a university could easily award him a PhD.

Baba wrote a code which took the help of the Google search engine to look for her name on different websites every day. In her longing, Neil brought a cat to their house despite of Chinu's aversion towards them. He often watched a part of '*Gunda*' before dozing off at the night.

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A month later, Neil took the entire team to show the ruined palace. He narrated the entire history of that secured palace and asked the team to study it meticulously. A drone was flown above the ruined palace to get its Digital Elevation Model (DEM).

Chinu climbed a slope, spread his arms and dashed towards Neil while waving like a bird and singing '*Udi Udi Jaai*'. Neil chased him with a cane of a security guard. Chinu trailed him to the lake beside the graveyard of Sanam and dived into the lake. Neil followed him.

While returning, Baba drove the car while Chinu sat in the shotgun position. He played '*Maine pucha Chand se ki*' song on the music player. Neil extended his hand and pressed for the next song. The next song was '*Udh Jaana*' from '*Jaaneman*'. He was exasperated and pressed the next button thrice. '*Chanda Chamke*' from '*Fanaa*' movie started playing. Baba had put in extra efforts to dig out the songs based on either the moon or flying.

"How long do I have to listen to these songs?" Neil asked.

"Until we reach the moon," Chinu quipped.

"*Uda lo Uda lo...*" Neil sulked but realised his mistake.

Baba and Chinu broke into a roguish laughter. Neil realised his mistake and chuckled.

## 12. Crushed Club

### TWO MORE YEARS LATER

After intense hard work and several sleepless nights for two years, they were ready with their game-Vasumati. The grand banquet hall of Hyatt Regency hosted the launch event. It was decorated with lanterns, ribbons and balloons. Waiters hovered between tables silently and efficiently, making sure that glasses and dishes remained filled. Musicians were playing the theme music of the game. The bald VC had ensured that legends of the gaming industry attended the launch event. Baba gave a small speech and then opened the curtains to unveil the first look of the game. Later, Chinu took the podium and introduced the game and ended his speech with the teaser of the game. The show was webcast live for game lovers. Though it wasn't huge as compared to the launch event of '*Alien Attack*', it was spectacular.

To the outside world, it seemed to be a splendid event but only the trio knew what went into designing the game. They were exhausted not only physically and mentally but also emotionally and monetarily. It was a mega-budget game, demanding three rounds of huge investment bringing their net stakes to 24%. Due to their low stakes, three CEOs joined but were replaced. Baba's dream team was never built. One day, Kusum proposed to him but he rejected it. However, he never told Chinu about that. A few months later, she left the company and got married to someone else. The only silver lining was that they somehow completed the game despite overshooting the budget and deadline.

In spite of searching rigorously, Neil couldn't find Avani. When he saw the teaser on the big screen, the palace reminded him of their Jaipur visit. Memories of her made his pining intense.

Chinu arrived with a plate loaded with different delicacies and sat across him. Neil was lost in his world. Chinu saw him twirling the spoon in dal-rice dejectedly.

"I have received a call from our college," Chinu said to divert his attention.

"Why did they call?" Neil asked.

“They are inviting us to give a motivational speech at MINDBEND.”

“Are they sure? Don’t they know that we are dropouts?”

“Success, dude, success! It has the magical power to wash away any sin.”

“Yaar, you know the position of our company. We are far from being successful.”

“That is internal conflict, dude. Which company doesn’t have it? And, never ever forget that, despite all those low points, we have stayed strong and have designed two games.”

“Okay, tell them, we will come.”

Chinu realised from his actions and expressions that he wasn’t very much interested.

“What’s the issue?”

“Nothing! I don’t mind if the college is fine.”

“Dude, I got that. I am asking what is troubling you. You don’t seem excited enough,” Chinu said, looking straight into his eyes.

“Dude, I don’t know what but something is pinching me from within. I guess I am missing her terribly. Today is a big day for us but her memories still haunts me. She isn’t here but she is. She is pushing me for the best yet I am falling down. Her sting is killing me. Not letting me focus. Do something and find her, yaar. I want Avani. I want her beside me. Use all your means but find her for me. I am missing her terribly,” Neil cried.

“Bhai, you don’t have to ask us for that. Baba and I are already on the lookout for her. Believe me, sooner or later, we will find her,” Chinu said and embraced him. “I can totally relate to your yearning. You know what you need now?”

Chinu released him and pulled out a visiting card from his pocket. Neil examined the card.

“CRUSHED CLUB?” Neil asked.

Chinu winked at him.

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The Crushed Club was established for failed lovers. Every weekend, they met to share their heartbreak stories or poems with others. It had started in a parking space but then it became so successful that they shifted it to an auditorium.

When Neil entered the club, it had already started. He walked silently along the wall looking for an empty chair. A ruffled haired drunkard with a patchy beard was on the podium.

“I would like to tell you about my girlfriend. Sorry, my ex-girlfriend. Sorry, my stepmom. What have I not done for her? A birthday party at Marriot. Mercedes as a Valentine gift. Switzerland holidays. When my father cut me off his will, she hooked up with him. Bitch, Female Pig, Kutti, Kameeni, Kulachini, Ran...” The host dragged him away from the mike. “I love you. I love you, Lily. I love you.”

Neil giggled while slipping through the occupied row. He found an empty seat and sat on it.

“Hello!”

Neil turned towards the voice and was astonished to find Jaimin.

“Oh! Hi!” Neil greeted.

“Did you find Avani then? What is she doing nowadays?”

“*Bas dard deti hai* (Just giving ache to me).”

“Not able to find her, right?”

Neil shook his head.

“I have read each and every published paper on chemistry in the past four years,” Neil said. “You know, I could have easily got a PhD in chemistry.”

They shared a laugh.

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After the Crushed Club session, they took their conversation to the bar on the upper floor of the auditorium.

“*Yeh Bhagwan ne bhi naa achche se kata hai hum teeno ka* (Fate has screwed the lives of three of us) I love her. She loves you. You love her but she can't be with you because I love her,” Jaimin said and gulped his whiskey down.

“I guess we will have to spend our lives like this only,” Neil said.

“*Kambaqt dil manta bhi to nahi. Yaha se to mita du* (pointing at his brain) *magar yaha se kaise hatau* (pointing at his heart)?

(What should I do of this damned heart? I can erase her from my mind but how do I remove her from the heart)?

Neil nodded with tearful eyes.

Jaimin continued, “If you find her then tell her that she is not destined to have my love. It's her loss.”

He stood up but suddenly Amancha appeared before them carrying a glass of vodka.

“Amancha, what are you doing over here? Bhai, *yeh shaadi ki baarat nahi toote dilon ki mehfil hai* (Dude, this is not a procession of the wedding but the assembly of the heartbroken).”

Amancha looked inquisitively at Jaimin.

“Dude, this is not a nuptial parade, I mean not a procession of...” Neil said.

“I got it. Rini dumped me, yaar,” Amancha stuttered and took a generous gulp of vodka from his glass.

Neil and Jaimin couldn't mask their laughter.

“Why? What happened?”

“What can I say, yaar? Can you imagine that tea leaves can cause a breakup?”

“Means?”

Amancha occupied a seat at the table and said, “She likes a balcony garden. So, we bought flower-pots for that. I didn't have any problem with that. She read somewhere that tea-leaves are a good source of fertilizer so she

started dispersing them in pots. We started consuming double the quantity of tea-leaves. No problem. One day, while dispersing tea-leaves, she saw a beautiful butterfly on a jasmine flower. No problem. The very next day, she gets a butterfly tattoo. I am fine with that too. But! But then she asked me to get one. I am scared of needles but I couldn't tell that to her as I didn't want her to think that I was a craven. So, I refused. But then she had this stupid idea of having a half of a tattoo on her arm and the other half on my arm. So, she asked me again but I was too scared of the idea of a needle touching my body, so I didn't sway from my stance."

"Uh-oh!" Jaimin exclaimed.

"She insisted and I persisted."

"I hope she didn't leave you," Neil said.

Amancha nodded with a gloomy face.

"You are stupid. Don't you know how to handle girls?" Jaimin yelled at him.

"Exactly, you should have gotten a small tattoo. What's the harm?" Neil argued and took a sip from his glass.

He ripped apart his shirt. His entire torso was covered with different kinds of tattoos.

"Shit!" Neil squealed and threw up a bit. Jaimin pulled out a tissue paper and dabbed it to clean the table.

"I have more tattoos than Ghajini and Scofield putting together," Amancha said and emptied his glass.

"Did she come back?" Jaimin asked.

"Suddenly, the syllabus had changed. She said it wasn't about tattoo but commitment. Can somebody go and tell her that we have been married six times? Even, my religion doesn't allow it. But still, she doubts my commitment. *Sab siyapa ho gaya hai, yaar.* (Everything is messed up, yaar.) Now, our families are involved. The business war has been ensued. They are fighting in such a manner that even India-Pakistan army will be embarrassed. Trust me, don't ever get married in life."



“What are you saying? Students in Jaipur are giving an example of your love,” Jaimin said and took a swig of whiskey.

“Rubbish! I know what exactly love is. Before the wedding, ‘*Jaanu jaanu babu babu*’ happens. Everything is celebrated. First date, first hug, first kiss, first sex, every first. And after the wedding, *babaji ka thullu*. Today is my birthday. Forget about the gift. That bitch has not even wished me... Daddy’s princess... fu...” Amancha said and leapt to his feet but couldn’t compose himself and tripped.

Neil helped him to rise up and said, “I think we should go home.”

“Exactly, we should go! She must answer me: what was all that? Those lovey-dovey conversations? What happened to all those promises of living and dying together? What is the meaning of sending those sweet poems and clicking those photos? Was it all time-pass?”

“Abey! I was talking about going to our own houses. You are drunk.”

“What rubbish! I am not drunk,” Amancha slurred. “You are drunk. He is drunk. I am not drunk.”

“No, never. I am never intoxicated. I am perfectly fine,” Jaimin said and drained his glass.

“Then, let’s go,” Amancha suggested.

“Who is saying ‘NO’? Let’s go,” Neil said and staggered to his feet, swaying a little.

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Since all of them were drunk, they hired a cab and crashed at Rinichi’s parental bungalow. It was late in the night so they took the fire-escape path and made their way to her balcony. Amancha banged the door. When Rinichi emerged, Neil darted an astonished glance at Jaimin whose mouth was wide-open. Their intoxication vanished on seeing Rinichi. They shook their heads. Amancha was overjoyed. His anger had subsided. How could he yell at the woman who was carrying his child? He opened his arms to embrace her. She responded with the same zeal and melted in his arms. Overwhelmed with love, they started crying. Jaimin and Amancha too became emotional seeing their love but then they heard the voice of Rinichi’s brother. She asked them to leave but Amancha being in the drunken state decided to face him. He

wanted to sort out the issue and take his wife. However, Rinichi wasn't drunk and was concerned with the tension between their families. There was a knock on the inner door of her room. She begged Amancha to leave but he wasn't ready to listen. He wanted her and his baby to be with him. Finally, she gave in and decided to go with them.

Quickly, they climbed down the fire-escape path and made their way out of the bungalow. When Amancha and Rinichi were getting inside the car, Jaimin commented, "Dude, are you seeing? Love is not so easy."

"Agreed! Even after marrying six times, they are running away from their home," Neil chuckled.

### **13. Flying High**

Neil and Chinu went to their college for the Speaker Conclave, an event in MindBend techfest. Baba met them at the event location. When he and Chinu saw the banner in the background, they shared a grin. Neil had specifically asked the moderator to keep the fonts of the title 'Flying High to the Moon' large and bold.

The host took his position behind the mic.

"I would like to introduce Mr Neilabh Desai, Mr Yogesh..."

"Wait, wait, wait!" Neil interrupted the host, sprang to his feet and asked the audience, "How many of you know about 'Vasumati' and 'Kasturi'?"

All raised their hands. He marched up to the host and said, "I guess this is enough for our intro."

There was a wave of applause.

The host handed over the mic.

Neil started his speech, "BTW, You must have heard about us... That I and Chinu... sorry...", he grinned and then continued, "Chandrakant had dropped out from this college."

The round of applause was louder this time but Neil waved his hand, asking them not to clap.

"Please don't clap. This is not a fun fact. Guys, I request you to complete your degree. During the funding round, every grave is dug wide-open. Every sin is thrown in your face."

There was pin-drop silence in the auditorium.

"But I would like to share one fun fact. We are submitting 'Vasumati' as our project work for getting our degree."

A 'WOOOHOOOOOOOO' sound engulfed the auditorium. The audience couldn't stop complimenting them.

Neil chuckled and continued, "I hope they don't give an F grade. You know, Kitano,...sorry again... Atanu sir is very strict."

The audience chuckled.

“Now, let’s switch to today’s topic: FLYING HIGH.

There is one famous quote in Kota: JEE will decide your honeymoon location: Shimla or Switzerland?

But I disagree. One exam cannot draw a line of fate on your hand.

If there is passion in your life to reach the moon, no one can stop you from flying high.”

He glanced at Baba and Chinu to see their reaction on using the phrase ‘Flying High’. Both of them nodded with a smile.

“If there is a passion to find a pearl, no one can stop you from diving deep.

Passion could be about anything: Music, Maths, Coding or Accounting.

Do some self-introspection and find out what excites you the most.

When you find something, devote everything to nourish it and achieve it.

Don’t rest till you find the way.

But, do you know, what is the biggest challenge?

When one encounters a small obstruction, he bids ta-ta bye-bye to his passion.

Then, that is not a passion but a hobby.

For passion, one has to struggle like a straw in the river.

And the most important part- Never ever measure your passion with petty words like fame, money and success.

Passion is no lesser than devotion.”

Neil looked at Baba and continued, “If any music company doesn’t give you a chance, that doesn’t mean that you can’t be a singer. If your passion is singing then you can always sing at birthday parties, Navratri, weddings or upload videos on YouTube.

You know my best friend, Baba. He has a passion for coding and game designing. He even received an offer from Google but what did he say, you know?

We will build our own Google.”

Everyone clapped and appreciated Baba.

Neil’s mobile tinkled. He drew it out while speaking, “In today’s world, one has to draw his own line of fate using a knife.”

He read the message on the lock screen and stopped.

He gestured to Baba and Chinu to come forward.

“Sorry, guys, I have to end this speech abruptly. Baba will take it forward.

But before leaving, I would like to quote a line by Longnecker: Life’s battles don’t always go to the stronger or the faster man. But sooner or later, the man who wins is the man who thinks he can.”

He removed the mic and gave it to Baba.

“What happened?” Chinu asked.

“Avani...,” Neil couldn’t utter a word anymore but they had understood everything.

He rushed out of the auditorium with Chinu. He ran straight to their car and asked the driver to drive him to Mumbai as fast as possible.

## 14. A Channel For Life

On a full moon night, the swift blow of wind swept up and rustled the branches of the nearby forest. A flock of crows hovered over the sky. In the mustard field, yellow flowers had bloomed, swaying with the wind. When the dogs stopped howling and started whining, the farmer jolted out of his sleep. It was a bad omen.

From the woods, Vasumati, a beautiful witch, rode a horse across the field. She aimed and darted an arrow at the squad of soldiers. They were chasing her. Her long braid of dark auburn coloured hair steered the horse and also served as a whip. An hour later, she had killed off every soldier and climbed down from her horse. She rummaged through the pocket of the chief for a map and then studied it carefully. The destination was very far but before that, she had to retrieve Parasmani. She mounted the horse and headed towards the Swet Sarovar lake.

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In the beginning of the second stage, a python had swallowed Vasumati and tried to bend itself to crush her but her braid emerged out of its mouth, grabbed a knife-like pointed stone and started slitting its skin. First, her head appeared and then her torso. When her hands were free, she grabbed her *Taalismaani* sword and slashed the python into two halves along the length. She was covered with filth so she dived into the Swet Sarovar but soon found herself, surrounded by wild aquatic animals. She whipped out a magical throwing star. She had only one of its kinds and was saving it for a major battle but she had no choice now so she fired it in the air. Within a moment, a waterspout was developed, swallowing her and pushing her down in its current. When it slowed down, she found herself in the middle of the lake. Plunging into the lake, she hunted down a large trunk. It was too heavy to lift. There was a puzzle written on the top of it. She solved it and set the five words, i.e., WATER, accordingly and tried to lift the cover to open it but found it locked. Using her long fingernails, she unlocked it and then picked up a luminous stone-Parasmani.

When she emerged out of the lake, a squad of soldiers was ready to welcome her. She fought valiantly using three swords and finished them off.

Then, she mounted her horse and raced towards the palace. She picked

up a long bamboo stick and used it to jump across the high wall.

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The gate of the fort was wide-open for her companions. The fort area was painted in blood. The tolling of the bell filled the atmosphere.

The general of the demon army was scared by seeing dead bodies in the porch area. He saw her blood-soaked footsteps on the floor and staggered in the opposite direction. In terror, he had forgotten that a witch had a reversed feet and came face to face with her. Without any delay, she slashed his head. She stood outside at the gate of the chamber.

The demon, Dritasur, announced from the terrace of the palace that her baby was inside the chamber filled with poisonous gases and had a few minutes to survive before the gases took its life. The password of the gate would be revealed only if she would hand over the Parasmani.

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The chamber was designed in the labyrinth of narrow corridors with moving walls and occasional tunnels. In the centre of that labyrinth was her baby. She had two magical items left with her- an explosive ball and a convertible wing. Using these two items, she crossed the maze and retrieved her baby. She fed herself and her baby a potion to nullify the poisonous effect.

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In the corner of the palace, there was a Shiva temple. The priest fetched water from a well and poured it over the Shivling. He crushed flowers and leaves using Parasmani, mixed it with cow ghee and applied it on the Shivling. Cow milk was being poured slowly over it while he chanted the mantras. He was preparing an elixir for Dritasur.

Outside the temple, Dritasur was pacing up and down frantically. When Vasumati arrived, he ordered his squad of soldiers to attack her. Her baby was tied around her back. Within a few minutes, she slashed down all the soldiers and confronted Dritasur.

A fight involving magical fireballs ensued. When they were out of it, a swordfight ensued between them.

When Dristasur realised that he couldn't beat her, he darted a dagger at

the priest and smirked. She stabbed a sword into his heart.

When she thought everything was over, she heard a roar of soldiers charging towards the palace. Earlier, the tolling bell had signalled them for a danger on the fort.

She had already utilized a magical convertible wing.

When the army surrounded the palace, she released oil barrels in all directions and ignited them with a lamppost. It started a fire in all directions.

She dashed towards the well and jumped into it. On the wall of the well, a message was engraved- Water is a channel for life. Covering her baby's mouth with one hand, she dived into the water and found a hole. The bottom part of the well had U-shaped water seal (normally found in a toilet) structure. She swam through it, emerged out on the other side and made her way through a one-way dimly lit tunnel by following a stream of water. However, at the end of the tunnel, she encountered a heavy door.

Beneath the hill, a tombstone slid in the graveyard and a message was sent to Neil's mobile.

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On the flight, Neil read the received message for the umpteenth time: *A tombstone slides at 37°31'37.3"N 126°55'58.1"E (Yeouinaru, Seoul, South Korea)*. He knew that the message would be for Avani. The memory of their visit to the ruined palace-Noor Mahal during his Jaipur trip and their discussion on the presence of a tunnel flashed before him. Not only had he based the architecture of the game's palace on Noor Mahal but also the internal design. A regular gamer wouldn't have decoded the meaning of the inscription- *Water is a channel for life*. Only Avani could decode it. Only she knew about the existence of one way tunnel as an escape route in case of emergency.

As soon as Neil landed at Gimpo International airport, Seoul, he rushed out and hired a cab. He asked the driver to speed up. It was raining that day, but the driver knew all shortcuts. He drove swiftly and dropped him outside her office. Immediately, he went to the reception area and inquired about Avani. But, she was done for the day and had left for her house. He took her address. She lived on the other side of the bridge. He asked the driver again



to speed up but they encountered a huge traffic jam on the bridge. There wasn't any shortcut this time so, the driver suggested him to cross the bridge on foot as her house wasn't far away. He stepped out and paid him handsomely.

He was impatient and desperate to meet her. He hung the bag and started running on the pavement. It was drizzling a bit but he ignored it. When he reached the middle of the bridge, he saw a girl gazing down from the bridge.

Neil stopped immediately. Fat tears oozed out from the corner of his eyes.

"Hey! Be careful or you may fall," Neil said.

Avani closed her eyes. She recognised the most awaited sweet voice.

"Though there isn't a better romantic place than a bridge in this world, but many broken hearts have given their..." Neil couldn't speak more. His heart was beating unevenly. He collapsed on his knees.

Avani turned towards him and nodded with moist eyes. She also collapsed taking the support of the bridge on the pavement. She was sobbing in the high of emotions.

Neil walked on his knees towards her. He took her hands but she pulled her hands away and started hitting him.

"Why couldn't you come earlier?"

With brimming tearful eyes, Neil pulled her closer and took her in his arms. She closed her eyes and buried herself in his embrace.

"I missed you very much, Avani."

He gave a peck on her forehead.

"I love you, too," Avani murmured and embraced him tightly.

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Later, they strolled hand in hand on the bridge.

"Shall I say something?" Neil asked.

"Yeah?"

“You know, when we met for the first time in Goa, I was very scared.”

“Why?”

“*Suna tha ki chudail bahot khoobsurat hoti hai* (I have heard that a witch is very beautiful).”

“*Tum gaali de rahe ho yaa taarif kar rahe ho* (Are you praising me or insulting me)?”

“Of course, *gaali de raha hu* (I am insulting you)!” Neil quipped and stepped back hastily. She tossed her long hair and chased him but with a smiling face.

### **The End**

Hello!

If you like ‘**College Days**’ and are feeling kind, an **Amazon review** would be greatly appreciated.

Regards,

Devayu

## **Hidden Meanings in the Story:**

Let's see, how many hidden meanings have you figured out?

- 1) Song '**Chingari Koi Bhadke**' from the movie '*Amarprem*'
- 2) Do you know that the **multiplication** done by Neil was **incorrect**?
- 3) Why did **Neil stop smoking**?
- 4) -----τβπ-----
- 5) Why are the name of the games- **KASTURI** and **VASUMATI**?
- 6) Name of protagonists. Why did I choose that?
- 7) Which is **the nearest chemical company** to the mentioned location of Korea?

You may contact me on Facebook: [www.facebook.com/devayu35/](http://www.facebook.com/devayu35/)

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