

something i never
told you

shravya bhinder



I dream about you way too often for us to be -
Just Friends

Something I Never Told You

Shravya Bhinder

“Just because of something which happened in the past, do not stop believing in love, do not stop looking for love, do not stop loving.”

Nirmaan Vihaar Metro Station New Delhi, India

“Why thirty? We agreed on twenty-five before I sat in your auto. I pay only twenty rupees every day. I am will pay only five rupees extra that too because I am running late for work.” I almost screamed at the autowala who was in no mood to leave the golden opportunity of further spoiling my already spoilt morning.

“There was so much traffic bhaiya ji” he responded quickly, putting all his teeth on display. I assumed that the motive behind his act was to earn some extra bucks early in the morning. If he cared for my opinion on his shameful display of gums and teeth, I would have advised him not to open his mouth in such a fashion to show his tobacco stained teeth in public places or else he could be jailed for terrorizing people with his fangs. He teeth were definitely more than the required number, packed and clustered in his usual sized jaw, overlapping each other. I quickly took my eyes off his mouth to stop the uncalled for scrutiny and started searching my pockets to see if I had any more money on me.

I was running very late for my first day at work with my new manager. I wondered if I was going to retain my job. It was an open secret that my new manager was a strict man. He loved taking disciplinary actions. I feared that I would be kicked out of my job, without much discussion, only a few days before a chance to use my newly delivered debit card for the first time. Surviving in a consulting firm was tough for a fresher, tougher if you know nothing and were always late.. I belonged to the second category of course. My name is Ronnie D, and I am not a musician.

Well, my name is Raunak Dhodi. After years of being teased because of my prehistoric kind of name; I changed it to Ronnie during college. I wanted to make friends and look cool. Honestly, neither of the two happened. In fact, my only two friends were the two people I lived most of my life with- my cousins. But I shall talk about them later.

So, I searched frantically and found not a single penny in the back pockets of my trousers, and it turned out that the front pockets were not a penny richer than their counterparts. However, I did manage to scoop two, two rupee coins

from a pocket in my wallet. I flipped open my laptop bag in a jiffy to put my poverty on display outside the metro station.

As expected nothing came out of it apart from my metro card, my company's laptop and a few loose papers with ink stains on them. "I do not have more money," I told him once again straightening my shoulders. He looked at my open palm, the two shiny coins on it to be precise. "I will take four more rupees then," he declared shamelessly. With no other option in sight, I handed over my only assets to him to get him off my back.

"This day is the worst day in the history of all the bad days I have had in my life" I mumbled to myself climbing up the deserted stairs. No, the metro station was not deserted, it was full of commuters just like any other day- Commuters who preferred the escalators over stairs. I reached the automated doors at the entry, put my hand in my pocket to fish out my metro card. "Where is it?" I wondered and unconsciously followed the ritual which I had developed over the years- back pockets, front pockets, shirt's pocket and finally the bag. It was not on me. But I did recall seeing it a little while ago.

"Shit!" I exclaimed recalling the last time I saw it. I recalled looking at the blue card outside the station, when I opened my bag for the wrenched auto wala. "It must have fallen off my bag then; I will never find it now" I dashed down the stairs. Dropping something in Delhi and hoping to find it seconds later is too much of wishful thinking. I dropped the card loaded with one hundred and thirty rupees and seventy-five paise rupees. If I ever got even to get a glimpse of it in my lifetime- it would be a miracle.

Worried and scared, I frantically searched the card on the stairs and then on the footpath where I got down from the auto. It was nowhere to be seen..

"Shit, Shit Shit!" I knew saying it thrice made nothing right yet three times the usual shit was the only way to describe my situation at that point- stuck outside Nirman Vihar Metro Station, penniless and late for work.

I turned around contemplating a walk back home. It was going to be very time consuming and tiring affair but as they say- Desperate times need desperate measures. I live close to three kilometers away from the metro station and am not an athlete, neither was I one at back then. But a poor man should walk - I told myself and looked back at the stairs one last time.

The deserted stairs were not deserted anymore; a girl sat on the second step with her head bowed down. She was talking to someone over the phone. Her lovely long hair fell over her shoulders, and I was unable to see her face. I was standing only four or five steps away from her and noticed that she had rings almost on all her fingers and I recognised one of them- the gold ring on her index finger with a green sapphire in it. Her fair delicate hands were busy untangling imaginary knots in her shiny hair.. Dressed in a white kurta and salwar, she was lost in her conversation, unaware and unfazed that her blue dupatta beautifully spread on the last stair and covered the dusty path to the stairs. I was getting late for work and was most definitely going to lose my job, but I froze where I stood. Her hair, posture, the way her hands moved made me skip more than a few heartbeats. I knew her. Unintentionally my eyes traced her sheer dupatta , her feet covered in golden jutti were visible from under the sheer fabric.

In my head, a Shahrukh Khan song was about to play in the background, and I was inches away from being drifted into a dream song sequence when I spotted it, under her dupatta- My metro card. Well, it was a metro card and could be mine or someone else's. But as long as it had enough money in it to take me to my destination I did not care who the master of the plastic card was. "Excuse me," I said walking towards the girl who sat there like she owned the station. Listening to my voice directed towards her, she raised her head. Her dark brown hair covered her face. She transferred her mobile phone to her left hand and swept away her mane from her face gently with her fingers. Our eyes met, and within a flash of a moment, it is 2013 again. "Adira" her name fell out of my mouth abruptly, and she looked at me as if I was a psychopath stalker.

June 2013, East Of Kailash New Delhi

“I do not know yaar. It has been three days already, and I have not made any friends.” I told my chuddi buddy Rohit Nagpal. We are also distant cousins. He is the first of the two best friends that I had told you about earlier. He was preparing to get into Merchant Navy then and had taken one year off after twelfth standard to make it. He left his dreams of joining the Marines after meeting his then girlfriend now wife and ended up owning one the most significant startups in Delhi, which is a different story though.

When his Dad offered him to take one year off his formal studies and prepare for the entrance exams, he decided to give it a try. It was too good an offer to decline. I wondered why my dad did not give me such lucrative offers once in a while. Taking a break was so much better than trying to make friends at a new college.

“Why can I not join the same college as my other friends” I decided to put up a brave fight before giving in to my parents’ pressure and joining a “Prestigious” college in Delhi. My dad looked at me through his glasses. “Because I do not want you to. Very few students get a chance to join a college like Hindu and I cannot let you waste the opportunity. Do you know what is the yearly fees of the third-grade college you want to attend? I cannot afford it and why should I? Money does not grow on trees. I will see what college do you send your kids to. Children nowadays do not value money...” the dreaded lecture began, ending my dreams of studying with my friends.

“Your name is hilarious. Change it or else you will have no friends, and you know it, These Hindu walas want cool friends. Be a cool dude.” Rohit suggested mockingly and I snapped back into reality.

I saw Rohit roll over the single bed to land on the floor laughing. Once he was done with his drama, I give him a DO NOT GO THERE stare, and he thankfully did not bring the delicate topic up again.

How could I tell him that I had every intention of introducing myself as Ronnie at my college but the attendance register beat me to my introduction, and on day one I became the most uncool guy of the college, at least for the next many days. With my head hung, and my face buried in my book, I heard the entire class giggle every time my name was called out. I avoided meeting the eyes of anyone and everyone for the next few days. It was to be my tenth day at college, had Nani not called me to help her with some household work. I was glad that she did and hoped that some else got the chance to be the butt of all jokes in my absence at college.

My Nani lives in East Of Kailash, a posh colony in South Delhi. After my Nana's death, Nani started sharing her house and loneliness with Paying guests. She used to keep only one paying guest in her home at a time, usually, girls who were either in the city to study or work- with seven boys in the family, she knew how much trouble a college-going guy can bring along and wanted to stay away from it. Her last paying guest left a few months ago to get married, and a replacement was to arrive in a few hours time. A week ago Nani told us that the new paying guest was a first-year student as well, we were delighted beyond words.

"I hope she is pretty," Rohit said while placing a sheet of newspaper in the wardrobe to line the shelves. Every time a new PG came, Nani told us to clean the wardrobes and replace the newspaper linings in them. "Same here," I absent-mindedly told him folding a colorful Sunday issue to line on the topmost shelf. I am five feet eleven inches tall and Rohit is five four, so the top four

shelves were mine while the rest of the wardrobe was his to tidy up.

“Why do you care?” he asked me wide-eyed. I wondered what he meant and looked at him for an explanation. “Come on! You also know that you will not even look at her properly let alone talk to her or do anything beyond that. You are too shy” he was pulling my leg again. I wanted to give an appropriate response but quick, witty replies is not my speciality. I avoided eye contact with Rohit and admired my handiwork instead. My part of cleaning was done, and the top shelves of the wardrobe looked neat.

While Rohit was still busy with his part of the cleaning, I decided to laze on the bed in the cool room until Nani called us downstairs to help the new PG with her luggage. Going by the history, they hardly came with anything more than a duffle bag and a suitcase.

The moment Rohit closed the doors of the wooden wardrobe we heard Nani’s shrill voice from the ground floor. “Come and help her with her bags you two, she is here.” My Nani was gifted with two separate set of voices, one was the harsh voice which we usually heard around us and the second was a soft, melodious voice which could put a coo coo to shame. She used her coo coo voice to communicate with people of high authority or our NRI relatives and their kids and also with her PGs but only for the first few days of their stay in her house. As we descended the stairs, we heard her talk to the new girl in her coo coo voice. “You can leave them here; my boys will take these upstairs. You follow me inside as I need to talk to you.” She told her PG. Rohit, and I looked at each other rolling our eyes at the extra sweetness of Nani’s tone.

We headed straight outside the main door where a green and yellow CNG auto was parked. I looked at the bags on the ground-

two stroller bags, one duffle and one large backpack inside the auto. Rohit picked the large backpack and his facial expressions told me that he could not manage to take the second bag, so I passed him the smaller of the two stroller bags instead. I placed the duffle bag on the bigger stroller and turned around to follow Rohit upstairs. “Bhaiya give me fifty rupees so that I can go” the autowala called after me.

“Fifty rupees? Madam did not pay you or what?” I asked him surprised. “She was too busy on her phone, and then the Amma Ji took her in. She forgot to pay me. She did not even take out her bags from the auto.” he replied with a displeased look on his face and resumed smoking his beedi. I signaled him to wait, and instead of going to the first floor with the luggage, I walked into Nani’s drawing room instead.

Nani was nowhere to be seen. On the black leather sofa, I saw a slim figure sitting in a relaxed pose. It must be Nani’s new PG- I assumed looking at her from a distance. She was dressed in a pair of denim shorts and a short-sleeved red T-shirt. Looking at her choice of dress, I could predict that Nani and she would not be friends for long. Nani had a conservative thought process when it came to the dresses her PGs should wear in the house. She was sitting crossing her long slim legs, left on top of the right and moved her left leg rhythmically while looking at the screen of her phone in her right hand. There was a delicate gold ring on her index finger with a green sapphire on it.

As I walked closer to her, she felt my presence. It was the first time I saw her beautiful face which got embossed on my heart forever. She had the most beautiful face I had ever seen. Her skin was clear with absolutely no makeup on it. Her cheeks were pink due to all the heat she had traveled in. Tiny sweat beads rested on her

forehead; she had large almond-shaped eyes, deep and soulful. They looked through me. Her small nose and pink lips looked as if were created by an artist in a painting. She got up from the sofa to face me. Honestly, she looked like an innocent fawn, with her big innocent eyes and long legs.

When I think of our first meeting now, I am sure I came across as a creep due to my constant stare. At that moment, I felt that I was under some spell; under her spell. But I soon came out of the state as Nani decided to bring me back. She walked in making as much sound as she could with her rubber chappals and gold bangles. “Adira” she called her out.

“Adira” the name echoed in my head. I loved the sound of it. Her name was as magical as she was. Adira took her eyes off me and turned them towards my Nani. I tried to do the same, but my eyes did not want to move away from her. Look elsewhere you stupid or she will think that you have some problem with your eyes or worse, with your brains! I told myself, but the eyes will just not listen. I stood there, dumbfounded, staring at Adira while Nani began some chit-chat. Probably I even had my mouth open at that time- I do not remember as I was too engrossed in acting crazy to notice such little details that helped me make a fool of myself.

Their conversation did not register in my head either; I was noting the particulars of Adira's face, the way her lips moved as she spoke, the way she played with her hair continuously untangling the non-existing knots and the frown which appeared on her forehead quite frequently. She smiled at Nani, and I looked in wonder at her beautiful lips and perfect teeth, which mind you; were the whitest I has ever seen. She looked like an angel, little did I know that then that hers' was face that was going to keep me awake for many years to come.

Adira's eyes moved back to me. She did not look pleased. Just ask her about the auto fare and leave. Stop making a fool of yourself. My mind warned me one last time in clear words, but my body did not comply. Narrowing her eyes, she placed her hands on her tiny waist and said "What huh?"

Nirmaan Vihar Metro Station- Present

“What huh?” Adira asked me narrowing her beautiful, dark eyes.

Ask her to move away as you metro card is lying under her dupatta- the sensible me said but my eyes refused to stop looking at her, and my mouth would not open to utter even a single sound, let alone words.

She kept staring back at me with her right hand in the air signaling that she wanted me to state the reason for my constant, impolite and absurd stare. I looked at her dumbfounded, trying to recover my voice and find some words. It had only been three months, but it felt as if it was ages ago when I last saw her exquisite face. Adira left my Nani’s PG as soon as she finished college. “Her dad has brought her a flat somewhere in Mayur Vihar” This was the last piece of information Rohit gave to me about her two months ago.

Finally, after struggling for a very long half-a-minute, my vocal cords decided to work. Phew! The mind said and then bit its tongue. “Hehehe” an awkward and funny giggle escaped my mouth. Where did that come from? I wondered and quickly tried to do some damage control by uttering the word “Card” very meekly.

“Card? What card?” she asked me looking every bit annoyed that she was.

I decided not to say anything more at that moment - Not your day Ronnie. I pointed towards her dupatta instead, and her eyes followed my gaze. She looked down at her dupatta and then back at me again. Does she not remember me? It has just been three months! “Hold on yaar, there is ...” she paused moving her hand up and down my frame and then addressed me. “What is it Raunak?” She remembers me! I lost my voice once more in excitement. “Let me call you back once I get into the Metro,” she told the person on the other end of the phone. I was looking at her precisely after three months and knew nothing about her present circumstances, yet I hoped that she was talking to a girl and not a boy.

This your chance Ronnie to make a new start with her. You just have to confidently ask her to free that Metro card from under her dupatta. She will be so sorry when she realizes that she wasted your time and then maybe you guys can start talking, be friends. *Status Check - Air Castle building, work in*

progress. She walked towards me, with her eyes still narrowed. Her thick, long lashes fanned her cheeks every time she blinked.

“Just.... Just my card” I said pointing once again towards the card. “Oh Okay,” she said looking casually in the direction I pointed towards. *Ask her out for a coffee. A Date? No, that will be a little too desperate. Just take her number today-* I was still contemplating.

Before I could think of how to ask her out or maybe, strike a conversation, my happy plans came under a bus called reality because she had already turned her back at me and was pacing towards the stairs. The blue plastic card lay on the bottom of the stairs silently witnessing my misery. I picked it up hastily and followed Adira inside the Metro Station.

Our accidental encounter set off a series of flashbacks in my head, running on a loop. I recalled each and everything as if they happened just yesterday.

June 2013, East Of Kailash New Delhi

Narrowing her eyes, she placed her hands on her tiny waist and said “What huh?”

“The auto,” I said lightly.

“What?” she asked again, this time with a frown on her forehead. A small, soft bump formed between her brows as they narrowed and I had a sudden urge to kiss it.

Nani had had many PGs in the past, there were so many girls in my school, many more in the new college but I had never actually thought of kissing even one of them. Especially on the forehead. I felt all my blood rush to my head and fill my ears to make them warm. It was a different and fuzzy feeling. All of a sudden I was light in the head and had sweat beads all across my forehead.

The thumping sound of Nani’s announced her return. She was now standing right between Adira and me. Adira - her name is so lovely- My thoughts went off again.

“What is it Raunak?” Nani asked me looking into my eyes.

“Auto wala is asking for his fare money. It is five... fif.. fifty rupees” Great so when Nani asks me anything, my tongue seems to work just fine. I got upset thinking of what Adira might be thinking of me. “And call me Ronnie,” I told my Nani in a hushed tone so that her PG could not hear it- or that was what I hoped at least.

“Oh, I completely forgot. Thanks for reminding me Raunak” Adira spoke to me for the first time, and that was the moment I understood why some people say that they want the earth to swallow them up. Moments like these make them say so. Adira, the prettiest girl in the world, called me Raunak!

Nani moved a little aside, just enough for Adira to stretch out her right hand to give me an old, tattered fifty rupee note. Within split seconds my mind worked to create a Hindi movie scene- our fingers would touch, and like

magic, she would know what I was feeling. She would start feeling the same and thereon; our love story would begin. Nani however, had different plans. Before I could brush my fingers with hers, Nani grabbed the note and stuffed it roughly into my open palm. “Jao” she ordered, and I complied.

Nirmaan Vihar Metro Station- Present

She was right there in front of me, walking towards the booth for security checks. There was a long queue at men's security check booth while only two other females stood in line ahead of Adira. She was done with the frisking within moments while I stood sandwiched between other stinking men waiting for my turn; not taking my eyes off her. I saw her walk towards the entry door, swipe her metro card and then make a phone call as soon as she was inside. She did not look as if she was in a hurry to board the train and relief ran over me.

Finally, it was my turn to be checked by a middle-aged policeman who looked bored of his job. I stood on the podium with my arms stretched out. He hovered a metal detector all over my body and then let me pass. I picked up my laptop from the stack of bags on the X-ray machine and dashed towards the entry door. *Please God, Please let this card have enough money to take me to let me.* I prayed hard, and to my surprise, my prayers were answered. Turns out that it was my card indeed.

Once in, I took slow steps and crossed her without looking at her. As I went past her, I inhaled deeply - A sweet fragrance enveloped her. She smelled like a cocktail - a blend of her shampoo, a flowery mist, and her favorite body wash from Body Shop- English Gardenia. How do I know all this? Well, I had gone out shopping with her many times during the last three years. Not exactly with her though, she used to go out shopping with her friend - Tamanna every other weekend, and I used to drag Rohit to the same places. Stalking? No, it was more of bird watching for Rohit and a one-sided date for me.

I took the escalators for my metro towards Connaught Place, hoping that she did the same. The opposite platform was where the train for Vaishali arrived. Even if she boards the train for Vaishali, I will be able to see her one more time. I thought and took my place on the icy cold bench at the the platform. I hoped she came to the same platform though.

One after the other, five Metro trains halted and left for Connaught Place. I was no longer getting late for my job because I was sure that by now my manager must type my termination letter and I had no job. I was just getting

late to collect my termination later for skipping work without informing anyone. *It is okay; it is just a job.* I told my worried mind which was thinking too much of the consequences my foolishness would bring my way. *Nothing is more important than my love of three years- one-sided love of three years-* I corrected my own statement, and that is when the worries started making sense.

I decided to get on to the next train and reach office. The clock on the platform showed it to be arriving in another two minutes. *Two minutes- she can still come to the platform any moment.* I thought and hoped for her to board the same train as me. The train decided to surprise the clock and me and arrived one minute earlier than expected. I looked at my phone to distract myself from the disappointment. No missed call or messages from anyone, none from work even.

The doors opened, and I squeezed myself in along with many others. Miraculously, I managed to get a seat next to the door and parked myself like a rock there. The announcement for the closing of the doors played inside the train, and I turned my head to look out for her one last time.

I blinked my eyes in disbelief as I saw Adira running towards the metro. She was holding a girl's hand whose face was hidden underneath a cotton garment. They rushed into the ladies compartment just before the doors closed, and we began our journey. The train moved slowly and then paced up matching my heartbeats. I got up from my seat. Anyone who has traveled in Delhi metro during peak hours knows the level of sacrifice I made; it is the most significant thing a metro traveler can ever do for anyone. I found myself making a way to the compartment next to the one where Adira was.

There she was- I looked at her. Her back was towards me- the beautiful "Om" tattoo at the nape of her neck, peeped from the translucent cloth of her kurta. She secured a few loose strands of hair behind her ear and talked to the other girl moving her hands and head animatedly. I smiled like an idiot leaning against a pole - running back and forth in time. I made a resolve to get off at the same station as her and talk to her, Finally!

The train crossed stations after stations and reached Rajiv Chowk. I was supposed to get down there, and I did because Adira and her friend too got down at the same location. I hoped that her friend would leave her there so that

I could talk to her but I guess that most of my hopes, as well as plans, never work. I had one more failed idea to talk to Adira, to add to the ever-growing list. Her friend took off the hideous, checkered cloth from her face. It was Tamanna!

Tamanna

With Adira in Nani's house, my visits there had increased by many folds. Earlier when Nani used to look for a volunteer to do her household chores or pay some bills or even bathe Samba- her pug. Rohit, Piyush and I vanished from the scene and made as many excuses as one could think of to avoid the work. But since her new PG arrived, both Piyush and I were at Nani's beck and call. Piyush even managed to take Adira's mobile number and from what I had heard last from Rohit; Piyush was planning to take Adira out for shopping to Khan Market the coming weekend.

"You would just keep buying tinde (gourds) for Nani and Piyush will marry this girl one day," Rohit said abruptly one day. I felt like punching him hard, but deciding where to hit him to hurt him the most took me forever, and my anger cooled down.

A week after Adira moved in, Piyush saw her for the first time and drooled over her. He confided into Rohit and as expected, Rohit kept me informed about all the devilish plans Piyush made to woo her. Honestly, he was quite a charmer, and I was hell scared of losing Adira to him much before I got a chance even to know her last name. Her last name is Kapoor by the way.

It was the second Sunday since the girl invaded my dreams and Piyush was already ahead of me. "Do you also have her number?" I asked Rohit sulking. "I can get it for you" he replied as comprehensibly as he could with one entire samosa stuffed into his mouth. Nani was not at home, but samosas were, and Rohit did not want them to feel lonely. So, he gave them the company of chow mien which was stuffed in his tummy already. Adira was not home either. Her childhood friend was to come from Pune and surprisingly Nani had given her permission to share her bedroom with her friend provided, this friend of hers' paid for her share of other household expenses like food, electricity etc. Piyush had gone with her to the airport to pick her friend up- Bastard!

At four, a taxi stopped in front of the main door. I peeped through the curtains on the windows and saw Adira get down with her friend- a thin, dusky female with short bouncy hair and too many piercings to count all across her ear flap. She had a bright smile. Following them, Piyush also stepped out of the taxi and paid the driver.

They did not take long to come into the house in the same order.

“Come Tamanna. Let me show you our room” Adira took her friend into her room without even acknowledging my or Rohit’s presence in the same place. Once they left, both Rohit and I looked at Piyush to find him staring at the girls disgustingly with his mouth wide open.

“Stop ogling,” I told him angrily.

“I am in love” He replied still looking in the direction the girls had disappeared into as if was dreaming.

“Shut up! Adira is way out of our league” I controlled my emotions as well as tone. Surprisingly the both of us, Piyush said, “I am talking about Tamanna.”

It took him just one week to ask her out and three to start dating her. If you ask me for my opinion, even Tamanna is out of his league, but it seems that no one is ever interested in asking me anything.

Many years later, I asked him if he remembered the exact moment when he knew he was in love with Tamanna. He told me that it was the first time when he gazed into her dark eyes he knew that his soul had finally found the place it needed to rest in. Love penetrates the hardest of hearts in the blink of an eye.

Rajiv Chowk Metro Station

Tamanna was Piyush's fiancée then, and they were to be married soon. Piyush was in the U.S. for his Masters and Tamanna had recently started working full time. Tamanna and I had met many times, and she did know me. Somehow I had a feeling that she even knew about my crush on Adira, all thanks to Piyush but being the nice girl she is, she never brought the topic up in our conversations. She was my family, and I did not want to be caught in an awkward moment in front of her as well as Adira. There was only one thing that I could do- Mission Abort! I quietly stepped into the next metro towards Gurgaon.

I got down at the metro station which was close to my office and took office's shuttle- a free bus service provided to all employees available every half an hour.

I dashed into the building as soon as the bus halted, talking to Adira was not in my fate, but I did hope that saving my job was. Quite a few people were waiting for the elevator, so I took the stairs instead. *Ten floors, it is not a big deal for a fit young man like me-* I thought. The morale booster worked till the first three storeys.. By the time I reached the fifth floor my tongue was hanging out of my mouth and at the ninth storey, it was sweeping the floor underneath. "Only one more floor to go, you can do this!" I motivated myself loudly.

Just then my phone buzzed, it was an unknown landline number from Gurgaon. "Hello" I answered it panting.

"Raunak Dhodi?" the male voice on the other end was stern.

"Yes, Sir, who is this?"

"I am your Manager, Rajbir. We are all in meeting room number 5. Whenever you come to work, come in here" he told me authoritatively.

"Yes, sir I am almost.." he disconnected the call before I could make an excuse.

"Shit!" I gathered all the courage which was left in me and moved towards meeting room number five.

Meeting Room Number 5

Five well-groomed girls and four formally dressed men sat with their heads bowed, around a wooden table in the room. The glass door was closed. A tall, lean man, wearing a light blue shirt and a pair of black trousers stood at one corner of the room. With a red marker, he was carefully writing on a whiteboard with his back towards the rest of the group as well the door where I stood looking at them. I stood at the door, peeping in, trying to analyze the situation; he paused writing and turned around looking straight into the direction where I stood observing the group. With his right hand, he signaled me to step into the room. “Hello Sir, I am...” before I could say more, he hushed me down with the look in his eyes and a finger on his lips. The group sitting at the table turned to look at me, most of them were trying to suppress their smiles.

“Hello, do we have an addition to the group?” I heard a beautiful foreign voice ask. Moving my eyes in the direction of the sound, I figured out that the team was in the middle of a call with someone.

The company I worked for, worked for its clients in the U.S., U.K. & Australia. My new team looked after the Australian clients. “Our team benchmarks the salaries for their employees in Australia and looks after their employee satisfaction surveys as well as Data analytics” I was told later by a colleague. When I think of it, I cannot understand how a person, with an average intellect like me end up in a niche job. More than being happy about my achievement, I was always scared that I was not cut for it and might not be able to perform what was expected out of me.

The previous evening I had a chance to spend some time with one of the seniors in my team, Prateek Jindal. We bumped into each other in the lift. My batchmates were teasing me for being the one with the worst luck as I was chosen to be a part of the team with the most desperate manager. That was when he interrupted our conversation and introduced himself. A nice guy, he mentored and trained the new joiners in the team. Later, Prateek took me out for a cup of chai and told me all good things about the team and its manager. The not so good things had already been fed into my head by the gossip mongers of my training batch, and I was sure that Rajbir and I were not going to get along; at all.

“Yes, Cathy” the guy in the blue shirt walked up to the table and addressed the voice on the other end. “The newest team member has joined us, late, very late” he looked at me with penetrating eyes, and I felt immediately intimidated by him.

Cathy laughed a casual laugh and asked me to introduce myself to her. *I am not prepared for this.* “Hi, my name is Ronnie..” I reluctantly began. “Isn’t your name not Raunak?” The man interjected yet again. “Yes .. yes madam, my name is Raunak Dodhi and I am new to the team,” I said sulkily. All the girls giggled in unison but calmed down instantly as soon as the guy with a marker gave them a cold stare. I felt my ears turn hot again. The unnecessary butting from the stranger during my intro had irked me. I kept my eyes down and stared at carpet underneath to calm myself down.

“Do not call me madam Rau. Raunaak, is it?” Cathy asked politely. “Yes, it is Cathy. So, we were discussing the requirements...” the man was getting on my nerves by answering all the questions in my place. He signaled me to take the lone empty seat. I walked towards it slowly and sank into the chair as low as I could.

“Why do you not change your name to Ronnie officially?” Rohit had suggested a week ago. Only if I had listened to his advice and done as he suggested.

Fifteen minutes later, Cathy and most of my new team members were still discussing the requirements for a project. The others took notes like there was no tomorrow. *Am I supposed to take notes as well? Nah! I am new. I do not anything about this project yet-* I saved myself from a random scribble on my brand new notebook which involved wastage of two resources- ink and paper. *I am saving some cost already for the project-* I chuckled lightly at my joke, again inviting the attention of the entire group.

“Cathy, I have a suggestion to make here” the man in the blue shirt continued his conversation with Cathy and my mind drifted to the conversation I had with Rohit about my name a week ago. *I should get it done asap or forget all about it.*

“...Raunak should try it. What do you say? It will help him understand the process and get absorbed into the system” these words brought me back to

the meeting room.

What? What should Raunak try? Why is he taking my name? I was not paying attention to the conversation and missed the part about me doing something. *Shit!*

I looked at the man taking with question marks plastered all across my face. I had no clue what was happening at the meeting. Frantically I looked at the whiteboard. Some words were scribbled on it- Charts, comparative analysis, data by Thursday, a better plan- what has this bugger signed me up for?"

"Yes, of course, Rajbir, we can do that. What do you think Raunak? Will you be able to manage it?" Cathy asked me.

So this is Rajbir? Honestly, I was expecting someone more mature, older maybe- like our college professors to be my manager. He looked so young! Even Prateek looked more than five years older than him.

I looked in Rajbir's direction and then towards the only other known face in the room - Prateek. He gave a head a bobble. I wondered if the bobble meant a yes or an or both. "Raunak, are you there?" Cathy asked.

"Yes Madam, Cathy sorry." the group laughed again.

"He says he will be happy to do it Cathy" for the first time since I had stepped into the room, Rajbir's interjection sounded like music to my ears. I listened to the rest of the call very attentively and pretended to make notes.

The meeting ended at Quarter past one. One after the other, the entire team left the room. It was only Prateek, Rajbir and I who stayed back.

"I am sure you did not understand most of what Cathy said" Rajbir addressed me. I nodded in agreement, and he continued. "When I first joined the company five years ago, even I faced this challenge. Do not stress over it; you will get the accent in some time on your own." Rajbir kept a hand on my back, and I thought that he was not as bad as I thought him to be- maybe, just maybe.

He asked me about my expectations from my job and explained his expectations from me. "Prateek will help you with the background of the call. He will also tell you what needs to be done by you. The client needs the

reports in ten days, and I would need your bit in five. You can reach out to Prateek for any help.” He told me looking in Prateek’s direction, Prateek nodded like a schoolboy.

Rajbir then left the room, leaving me alone with my mentor and I took a deep breath.

Prateek was a professional. He had an amiable smile pasted permanently on his round face. His small dark eyes moved quickly behind his round spectacles. He moved closer to the table and adjusted his chair so that his abdomen slid under it- this way he was the closest to his laptop. I am sure that helped him get the best view.

He pulled out a big excel sheet with lots and lots of data on it. I was sitting across him so he kept on rotating the laptop once in a while for me to be able to see the screen and what was on it. “So, as you do not have a laptop yet, move over and sit next to me so that you can see the screen. I will help you get your laptop as soon as we are done with this” he told me.

“Of course!” I said getting up and pulled out the chair next to him.

Meeting room number five was located at the center of the tenth floor. All around the room were workstations. Next to the meeting room, was a pantry area with a couple of table and chairs. People who could not go down to the cafeteria for lunch due to time constraints usually heated their food in the microwave at the pantry and had their food in the pantry. There was also a small snack counter inside from where one could get the packet of chips and biscuits along with some baked savouries. .

I moved next to Prateek, both of us sat facing the pantry door. I looked towards the bright laptop screen. Before he could begin, there was a sudden commotion outside the pantry gate, and I looked in the direction to see what it was.

It was someone’s birthday. A group of people was walking into the pantry with a big box of what looked like a cake and a few colorful birthday caps. The herd looked like a training batch. The group was boisterous; even Prateek looked up from the screen for a moment before he got back to look for a Power Point presentation which was hiding somewhere in one of the folders on his system.

While he was crazily clicking on the folders and scanning them, I checked out the room which had nothing unusual in it- a table, few chairs, a dustbin, some markers. "Here, got it," Prateek said, and my dull observation ended. He rubbed his hands together in excitement as if a gene was to appear out of them and clicked on file named- Gordon & Son's Deck.

From the corner of my eye, I could still see the unusually hoppy bunch going in and out of the pantry creating a ruckus. "Okay," he said. As soon as the Deck flashed open on the screen, I saw someone familiar at the pantry door from the corner of my eyes. My gaze darted into the direction- It was her. Standing at the door, with a little cake in her hair. She was giggling like a child; her face lit like a thousand candles every time she laughed, her eyes sparkled brighter than stars. She was the same as I remembered her to be- I felt the meeting room vanish into thin air and the warmth of her smile and laughter filled my lungs, I inhaled deeply. Her laughter had the same effect on me that the sunlight has on trees, it helped me survive, live life. Just like that, my day was brighter than any other day at work because the unexpected had happened- Adira Kapoor was at my office.

"You need to look here," Prateek told me in a very stern tone for the calm man that he was and instantly I looked back at boring the screen. He started explaining something, but my mind had lost track. I peeped at the door once again, sneakily. She was not there. Instead, some other girl stood at the same spot. But I could see her dupatta, the same dupatta that I saw in the morning. It was her. I cannot be mistaken in identifying Adira. Maybe she works here too- My heart swelled with hopes and dreams.

Is it her Birthday? No, it can't be. Her birthday is in December- Fourteenth December.

14 December 2013

My days at Hindu were not going that great. I attended college only for as many numbers of days as were required so that the college would let me sit for my exams. I had not made many friends, just three. We were more of weekend friends actually as we never met during the week at the college. In fact, that was the main reason why we had become friends in the first place. As neither of us inclined to attend college on all days- we had made a pact. I went to college on Mondays, Sanjay, the second guy in the group, went to college on Wednesday and Ankit the third one did the same on Friday. We proxied each other's attendance and made three copies of the notes for the days we attended college. During weekends we used to meet at a famous sweet shop for our breakfast, Chole Bhaure and to exchange notes. The days on which I used to be free, which were many of course; I preferred to go to Noida and hang out with my school friends. They too had no interest in attending their classes at their college which made things very easy.

My Saturday afternoon, as well as Sundays, were spent at Nani's house, helping the old lady with the household chores. Adira was a student at Miranda house and was very regular at college. For the first few days after striking an arrangement with my Bhature friends; I strolled around Miranda House to get a glimpse of her. Yes, I know that this sounds very filmy and typical, but when you are in love, you do not care about anything, especially if the desire is still one-sided and you get to see the girl very rarely. But she never stepped out during her college hours, which is why I left the practice and enjoyed my days at Noida instead.

While being at Nani's house on the weekends, I had so far exchanged a few hellos with Adira. She had my number, and I had her's. I used to take a screenshot of every her new DP she uploaded on her Whatsapp. I had a Facebook account too, just for her. I made it with a fake name and had put Justin Bieber's picture as my Profile pic. I had no friends on FB; I needed none. I had not made the account to make friends with anyone there. I just wanted to know more about Adira. I learnt a life lesson through Facebook though - beautiful girls do not accept random friend requests from people claiming to be Bieber; I sent her one and she not just declined it but blocked me as well. That was the end of my tryst with Facebook, at least for the time being.

Despite the fact that I did consider FB a waste of time, but I could not thank it enough for providing me with very useful information about her- her birthday. It was on Fourteenth of December.

“It is today,” I told Rohit excitedly as we headed towards Nani’s house.

“Why are you getting so excited then? Has she invited you to her party?” Sarcasm never left his tone, but I chose to ignore his comment.

“I did not even know that there is a party until you told me” I responded with an indifferent face.

“Then why are you so excited?”

How could I tell him that I had finally found the most fantastic present for the most amazing girl I knew, not expensive but amazing. In fact, it was expensive enough for me not to be able to afford it and I intended to borrow some money from Rohit. We were just a few steps away from Nani’s house when I decided to stop beating around the bush and hit the hammer directly on the nail. “I need some money” Rohit halted, “A loan actually” I added. “Okay,” he looked at me as if he did not understand what I meant. “I need the loan from you” I stated it out and aloud so that there was no confusion in his head.

“Let me guess, you want to buy a gift for Adira and have saved no money isn’t it?” Rohit always knew my circumstances and I expected him to be a little nice to me when it came to money. My parents gave me only three hundred rupees a week to manage my expenses which included my transport to college, lunch, etc. I never complained about the money as I was very well aware that it was the best that they could manage. *He might not lend me the money*- a scary thought crept in my head. I had not pictured this situation and was not ready with a backup plan. Rohit was my savior when it came to money ever since I could recall.

He took me out of my dreadful thoughts "Ronnie, you have been singing nonstop about confessing your love to Adira on her Birthday since the last two months, how could you have not thought of saving enough money to buy her a present for her birthday." I had no answer to his question, but I was happy as we were still discussing it. It is not a straight no then- I thought, I wondered if I was supposed to answer him, but decided to skip it. I looked

back at him with sad eyes, on purpose. They always worked with Rohit. “Now here, do not make such a sad face, how much are we talking about here?”

“Two thousand rupees,” I told him without meeting his eye, it was the most amount of money I ever borrowed from him, but without any more questions he handed his debit card over to me.

“I want you to accompany me to the shop so that we can buy her present. Would you want to come?” I asked him, and he readily agreed. I love him for being so cute a brother.

We reached the jewelry store in Khan market on Rohit’s new black Pulsar. “This, seriously?” Rohit suppressed his laughter parking the bike outside.

As soon as we walked in, we were welcomed by an elderly gentleman sitting on the counter. As we did not appear to be serious buyers, he did not pay us much attention post the initial greeting. “I want to buy something that I saw in the store in the morning,” I told him, and the look on his face changed from uninterested to keen.

I walked further into the store, and he followed me to the section that had delicate bracelets on display. Fifteen minutes later we were out of the place with a red velvet box.

“When and how are you going to give it to her?” Rohit asked me the umpteenth time turning his head a little as we drove back to Nani’s house. “I do not know yet” I replied from the back seat once more and started thinking of a plan.

Upon reaching our destination, we hurried to the study room on the ground floor. I had not seen Adira since morning, and I hoped to not bump into her before I was ready with my present.

Hurriedly, I sat on the black leather chair next to the wooden study table and started looking through the drawers trying to find a decently operational pen and some paper.

“Do you need something?” Rohit asked me just when I managed to find both the things in the last drawer on the table. “Nah” I replied and started recalling

the words I had thought during the ride back home to write on the note. “

“I will be outside,” Rohit said and walked out closing the doors behind him. I knew he was giving me space and time to think.

All by myself in the study, I started to write.

Thirty minutes later, I was done writing the most beautiful thing I had written, read or heard in my entire life, till then. I hoped that the message was good enough for Adira to understand my feelings for her. As I folded the paper neatly and pasted it on top of the gift box with a strip of sticky tape, Rohit walked back in with a stupid smile on his face and I knew that he was up to something. “I have some good news for you,” he said rubbing both of his hands together and grinning mischievously. “What is it that you are so excited about?” I asked me placing the box carefully in the uppermost drawer.

“We are going to Adira’s Birthday party” - He replied, all phlegmatic all of a sudden. I stared back at him with wide eyes and dropped jaw. *"How on earth did he manage that?"*

“How?” I finally articulated after a few quiet seconds.

“Tamanna was chattily inviting Piyush to Adira’s birthday party at her friend’s home. As I was with him, she had to extend the invite to me as well. I am sure you know how shameless I can be when the situation demands. So, I asked her if I could get you along. She looked at Piyush and then reluctantly said yes. I do not like this Tamanna girl...” I hugged him hard before he could say any more. This was just what I needed.

The party was at Malviya Nagar. Rohit, Piyush and I reached there, half an hour before the set time as Piyush wanted help out his girl's friend with the arrangements. Rohit and I tagged along with him in his car and had we no other option but to sit there and wait for the others to arrive.

One after the other, many unknown faces walked in, most of them were beautiful girls from Miranda house, there were a few of Tamanna’s friends, a guy named Sahil came in with a big bouquet of roses. I later got to know him to be Tamanna’s childhood friend’s brother. He worked at a bank in Gurgaon. Finally, at seven Adira came over with a small group of friends-

two girls and a beefed up boy who looked like a Gym instructor. He could not take his eyes off Adira and tried to put his paws around her at every given opportunity.

“Who is this guy?” I asked Rohit. “I don't know,” he said googling shameless at a long, fuzzy haired girl in green sweater and black skirt. Thankfully she was busy chatting with someone over her phone and did not notice my cousin, who was already frothing at his mouth. Had she caught him in his act, we would have been kicked out of the party even before I had the chance to wish Adira.

I chose to ignore the people around me, including Rohit; and focused on my plan for the night. I wanted to give the gift and note to Adira who looked angelic in a peach-colored coat which matched the color of her cheeks. Small golden earrings dangled from her earlobes and scurried at each of her movement. Her beautiful, glossy hair fell neatly above her breasts and framed her little face.

I managed to wish her Happy Birthday thirty minutes after she walked in, at that time her friends were with her, so I did not hand over my gift to her. “Thanks, Raunak,” she said with a bright smile and then moved her attention back to her friends. After a while, her friends dispersed from her side but the two men ensured that one or the other was with her all the time giving me no chance to present her my gift. I envied those two well dressed men, not just because they were close to Adira but because they could converse freely with attractive females. I, on the other hand, was the least comfortable in that department. *How am I to compete with them?*

After trying to approach her for one hour before and after dinner, I decided to slide my gift quietly in her handbag. She was too busy to notice, and I was sure that she would get the opportunity to check her bag only when she was alone; in her room. To my surprise, within three minutes of sliding the items in her purse, she got up to go to the loo and came out beaming with the velegt box in her hand.

Delhi was freezing that night, the temperature was way below the normal, yet I felt sweat beads on my forehead at the sight of her walking back into the room with my gift in her hand. I felt as if something blazing hot entered my lungs and made me breathless. *This is it! She has seen it.* I was more nervous

than I had ever been in my life.

She walked into the sitting area where close to twenty odd people were enjoying their drinks and music. Her high heeled boots made clink clink noises on the marble floor.

“What is this?” she asked looking at no one in particular. She was talking about the gift. No one said a word and Piyush swiftly lowered the volume of the music system. Adira looked every bit surprised as I wanted her to be. She sat down on the sofa next to Tamanna and looked at everyone one by one. “Open it and see, there is a note as well” Rohit cheekily told her, and my face went warmer.

Delicately, she removed the note from the box and took out her present- a delicate silver charm bracelet. It sparkled beautifully as the numerous lights in the room fell on it from different angles and directions. She traced each charm with her beautiful fingers as if she was kissing them, and then opened the note to read it. “Read it aloud; we want to hear what it says too,” The beefy boy told her. She giggled like a school girl and then obliged him. I looked at him in disgust but then quickly turned my eyes on to my angel as she read my note. My amateur words came out of her mouth like a beautiful poem -

Dear Adira,

When I thought of buying a present for you, I did what a person usually does- I went to a gift shop. But all found there were ordinary gifts. How could I give an ordinary present to such an extraordinary girl? The present had to be as beautiful, as serene and as lovely as you.

Then in the morning, as I walked into a store I saw this bracelet, and I thought of how well the charms in this bracelet define you. Hope you like it.

I am not a writer and words don't come to me easily. But looking at you, I think I can write a Love Story.

Happy Birthday Love!!

My breath was stuck in my lungs for as long as she read the note and I let it

out hearing her say “Love.”

“Tell me now who is it from? This is so lovely. It has brought tears to my eyes.” she said wiping a tear from the corner of her left eye.

“You moron, you did not write your name?” Rohit hissed at me, in a very low voice.

“I did not because I will tell her tomorrow, let her guess and be impatient today. That is my plan” I grinned back at him.

“It was me,” someone said, and the face-splitting grin disappeared from my face. It was the beefed-up guy. “Nitin!” Adira exclaimed in his direction, “You are so cute. I am blessed to have a friend like you” She added and I felt all the blood, as well as my life, was sucked up by the earth in one go. Lifeless, I looked towards Rohit who annoyingly remarked, “Well done Mr. Planner, what a jerk you are”

For the next fifteen minutes, we witnessed Nitin’s cheap acting and blushing skills. My head nearly exploded when Adira asked him to make her wear the bracelet which he shamelessly did. The girls went ooooh and aah-hh sss all over the gesture. Rohit and I took a leave, which no one opposed, and came back to our respective houses in Autos.

A little relief came in my direction when fifteen days later I got to know that Nitin had proposed Adira a few days after the party. She, however, considered him only a good friend. Last I knew, the guy has been friend zoned for life. The bracelet still shines on her slim wrist and looking at it each time- my heart hums a love song.

Meeting Room Number 5

“It looks like you are not very interested in knowing what I have to tell you, let me not waste my time here,” Prateek told me in an irritated voice after he found me peeping towards the pantry for the fifth time.

“It is not that sir... I ... I...” *Why do words fail me each time, especially when I need them the most?*

“Please talk to Rajbir, not me” the soft-spoken man I met just yesterday was suddenly, without much warning replaced by a grumpy Prateek and I was definitely in soup.

Prateek stomped out of the room leaving me thinking that I had finally managed to get myself kicked out of the job successfully. Do I wait here? Or do I go out and look for Rajbir. I decided to remain in the room for my manager but then was forced to move out as another team needed the room for a client meeting and they did not want an outsider to sit through and observe them. I stepped out and looked all around me, and there were workstations and cubicles everywhere. I did not know where my team was placed, so I strolled on the floor; looking for them.

There he is! I spotted Rajbir standing at a desk and Prateek stood next to him. I walked up to them, fearing the worst but it turned out that my manager was heading for a critical meeting and had no time to scold me. “I heard what happened in the room, I understand the lack of knowledge, but I do not understand or tolerate lack of respect and sincerity.” He told me in a low voice. “Now, Prateek will again try to explain the requirements to you. If you are not interested, tell me right now. If you are interested, then you may walk up to his desk in the corner and ensure that I do not have to talk to you like this ever again.” He gave me cold stare- *It looks like cold stares are his thing-* I thought to myself and without any word, I walked up to Prateek and apologised to him for my behaviour a few minutes ago. By the time I dragged a seat to sit next to him, the grumpy Prateek was gone, and nice Prateek was back to help me out.

The rest of the day went by in understanding the requirements of our client, getting my new laptop as well as getting a permanent desk assigned. I did get a chance to interact with my team members as well who were not very fond

of talking and making new friends either, I believed.

I would not lie, after seeing Adira at the pantry, I did get the urge to go and look for her in the training rooms, but I had exhausted my quota of excuses as well as sorry for the day and had to give it a miss. I was unable to spot Adira anywhere for the rest of the day. However, I did find my eyes wandering in the direction of the door as well as pantry more than many times while working on the project, in a hope to get a glimpse of her once more.

I was free from work one hour later than the usual time. The training batches left at eight and it was nine by the time I switched off my laptop and was all packed to head back home. Prateek arranged a company cab for me. The first thing that I did as soon as I sat in the cab was to dial Rohit's number to get Adira's whereabouts. Rohit always knows it all, about everyone.

Quite unexpectedly, Rohit was too busy to answer my call that evening. I received a text from him five minutes after he disconnect my call - Will call back in a while- at a friend's place.

Who else can I call to check where is Adira nowadays? I knew no one that well to be able to check about Adira without them asking me zillion questions regarding my query. She had changed her mobile number three weeks ago- How did I know that? Her display picture on Whatsapp was replaced by a picture of an adolescent boy who wanted to impress girls his age with semi nude DP; this happened three weeks ago. *Piyush, yes he should know as his girlfriend is Adira's best friend- but he is in America.* I dialed his number without further delay. He picked up the call after the third ring.

"Yo Brother," He said in a fake accent.

"It has just been a few months, where did you pick up this accent up from?" I inquired mainly to tease him.

"Wha? Shut Up!" he was not going to let go of the accent very quickly.

"So, how is life" I decided to talk about general things before getting on to the point.

"Life is good, but I miss India" There was a hint of sadness and gloom in his otherwise happy tone which was very confusing for me, he was in America;

studying at the expense of his father, What else does one want in their life.

“But why? Isn't America the best place in the world to be? Everyone wants to fulfill their big American dream I thought, and you were dying to go to America ever since” I reminded him

“It is quite amazing Ronnie. The place is lovely, scenic even. There is a great infrastructure in place, the roads are good, people are nice, the weather right now is amazing. It has everything that we want to be improved in India. But still one tends to feel now and then that something is missing”

“What is missing bro? Power cuts? Traffic Jams?” I teased him further.

“No, and for your information- there are traffic jams here as well. Terrible ones in places like New York. America is all that I dreamt of, it is what I thought I want, but now I know that it is not what I need. How do I put it- it is not India” I think I heard the big boy suppress a sob and decided to lighten his mood a little. It sounded like one of those days when he was missing his family and friends the most.

“Do you have a gori (foreigner) GF? Shall I tell Tamanna about her?”

“Shut up!” he got irked at my comment. “She knows that I will not think of anyone other than her. Moreover, I have something to tell you. But not now.”

“So, what is she up to nowadays?” he sounded thrilled talking about Tamanna, and it also solved my purpose, so I encouraged him to talk more. Piyush informed me that Tamanna had joined a PR company in Gurgaon. And the big news which he wanted to share later was that - Piyush had decided to visit India in the next six months and get married to Tamanna so that he could take her along to America. This was announced a week later. He was getting late for his school and told me and had only a few more minutes to talk. *Ask him-* the voice in my head ordered.

“So, do you have any news on Adira?” I asked him and then held my breath half knowing what was to follow.

“Are you still hung up on her?” I heard him laugh a weird laugh for the next few seconds while I continually rolled my eyes at his behavior at the other end. He took a while to settle down and then began with his usual lecture of

how I was a fool to be thinking that my one-sided love could get me anything more than pain and embarrassment. Every time this topic came up, he thought of it to be his duty to remind me about the difference between me and Adira and how I was not the type of guy a girl like her would like to date. That conversation was no different.

How could I tell him that my love for Adira was not dependent on whether or not it was being nurtured by love in return? She might or might not love me back as I was not “her type.” I loved her despite all odds as loving her madly, the way I did; was natural for me. She was like sunshine to me, and I like a sunflower was happy looking at her from afar, my love was not fazed by whether or not she returns my love.

I cursed myself all through his banter for bringing Adira’s name up- I should have waited for Rohit to call me back. If I could, I would have kicked myself in the ass for my actions. Finally, his time was up; he had to rush to catch his train, so he ended the conversation telling me that he would tell me if he got to know anything about Adira’s present whereabouts. I knew he was lying on my face but ended the conversation. The call lasted for about half an hour and there was still no call back from Rohit, which was quite unlike him.

I reached home at ten thirty and went straight into my bedroom. “Have some food” my mother called after me, but I bolted the door telling her that I was not hungry, “I have had food at work” I lied to her so that she did not worry all night about me and my empty stomach.

That night, I tossed and turned in my bed trying to get some rest after a long and tiring day at work but even sleep was not kind to me. Every time I closed my eyes, Adira’s beautiful face popped in front of me. I recalled the day when accidentally we had coffee together. No, it was not a date. It was a date actually; but not ours.

Cafe Coffee Day, January 2014

I had not progressed at all when it came to Adira. Still a timid guy, I used to admire her from afar and dreamt of confessing my feelings for her, to her one day. When was that one day going to arrive? I was not sure of it, but I hoped it came soon enough.

On a cold Sunday afternoon, Tamanna and Piyush planned a coffee date at Cafe Coffee Day Lajpat Nagar. I got to know through my personal eavesdropper Rohit, that Adira was to accompany Tamanna to the coffee house. I begged Piyush to take me along and lied to him that I had to meet someone at the market and needed a ride. Despite an icy wind blowing, the sun made an appearance in and out of the clouds once in a while making the day better.

“It is freezing outside Adira, sit with us until the time your friends do not come to pick you up” Tamanna insisted. Adira had plans to go to Saket with a couple of her friends who were coming from Mayur Vihar and were running late. “Ya, have some warm coffee.” Piyush offered her a seat. I too took a seat at the table, uninvited of course- The love birds looked at me with as repulse in their eyes as soon as I placed my bum on the soft chair. They looked at each other and then me, Adira was busy on her phone.

“Are you not going? You had to meet someone here right?” Piyush could not resist butting and kicked me hard in the foot. “ Ammm... My friends are also late” I replied with my eyes cast down, pretending to read the menu. “It is okay Adira is also here. You too have coffee with us while you wait” Tamanna said politely and got up with Piyush to order coffee for all four of us.

Adira and I were sitting opposite each other at a table next to the big glass windows which gave a view of the busy street outside. I sat opposite her. The winter sun shone weakly through gray clouds. She stared out of the window, and her eyes flickered as the sunlight glittered her flawless face. For the first time, I was sitting so close to Adira. The silver bracelet made delicate sounds every time she tapped her phone with her fingers; the sound was like music to me. She was wearing her usual perfume, and it's floral smell calmed me like it always did. Someone walked in the door, and cold wind from outside flew in, throwing her hair all over her face, she moved them aside delicately and

looked at me. I was so lost in admiring her, that I had not even realized that there were two coffees in front of us already. As our eyes locked, the surroundings disappeared. Suddenly there was a loud noise, her phone buzzed. It was her phone; she left leaving me alone at the table; apologizing to her friends. Tamanna and Piyush were sipping their coffee and cozying up at another table in the corner- it was their date after all.

I did not mind sitting on my table alone, with two cups of coffee and an empty chair. The cups lied untouched for a while. I kept thinking about her, about her almond-shaped eyes that looked deep into me. I picked up a cup and raised it to my lips. The first sip made me realize how all other drinks had lost their charm to me. I wanted to taste her, her soul, her mind. I wanted to know her more, more than ever.

A Week Later, At Work

The week flew by, all I managed to do was to sleep, eat, work and call Rohit a few times during the day to check if he had any news on Adira- so far; he had nothing. I hardly had any time to look up from my laptop while at work. Every night my shift was longer than usual, and I took a cab back home. Every morning, I reached the metro station in hope to bump into the girl on whose wrist my silver bracelet sat brightly. Every morning; I boarded the metro with eyes still looking for her, on the platform, on the train and everywhere else, only to be met with disappointment. I had not seen her at work after that day as well. I did make one or two futile rounds of the ninth floor, and that was about it. Piyush had not come back with any information either; I did not have very high hopes. Sometimes, at night I used to wonder if I had seen Adira or was it just a dream; a game played by my silly mind on my aching heart. The rational part of me was sure that it was no one else but her and that I was not mistaken. But my lonely heart was all up to blame the tricky mind and urged me to forget it all and move on with my life. You have too much on your plate already, it said.

Despite having put in so much effort in the project, I was not able to submit it on time. It was the last day of the two-day extensions which Rajbir quite unwillingly granted to me only because I was new to the team. Finally at six, with Prateek's help; I managed to complete the task. We cross-checked everything before sending it to Rajbir- *Thank God! I will leave work on time today.* I was relieved. There was a secret hope of watching the training batches go home and hopefully getting a glimpse of Adira, finally to put an end to the suspense.

Sharp at six thirty, I received an email from Rajbir.

Hi Raunak,

I have gone through the email you sent.

Meet me in meeting room number 5 at Six Forty-Five.

Rajbir

“Shit!” An exclaim escaped my mouth without warning, and I was met with stares from as far as four cubicles away. With apologies pasted all over my

face, I sneaked as low as I could and reread the email.

It did not look like good news. I was sure that I was not being summoned into the wretched meeting room to be praised. That was the moment when I first felt the power of written words; they could make one crap in their pants; especially if the words came from one's manager.

I picked up my laptop and walked towards meeting room number 5. Rajbir was sitting there busily working on his computer. Prateek and one more guy were also in the room, and they were on a call. Another call? I was scared of client calls after my first bad experience. I felt my stomach churn into knots- a terrifying thought found its way into my already messed up brain. *Are they about to fire me? Oh no! Please no God.* I offered my prayers to as many Gods as I could recall- a practice that I had begun for the first time during my board exams. I knocked on the glass door with my knuckles very gently, and Rajbir signaled me to come inside and take a seat.

I sat on the empty chair next to Prateek. The other guy in the room gave me a warm smile which I barely managed to return.

"Do you have a passport Raunak?" Rajbir asked looking at me and pulling the chain on the random train of thoughts which was unnecessarily running through my brain. He pressed the mute button on the call as well.

"Yes... yes, sir" I managed a response wondering why was I being asked such a question. *It has nothing to do with the Deck I prepared or has it?*

"I have a replacement here Mike," He said resuming the call immediately.

Before I could understand anything more, soft giggling sounds at the door broke my concentration. Like everyone else in the room, I too lifted my head up to see who it was - Adira! My heart skipped a beat. She was there. Dressed in a black skirt and crisp white shirt, she looked every bit professional. Her hair was tied back in a pony. She stood at the door with another girl who was dressed in a formal black dress. Their expressions said that the girls were apparently embarrassed to have disrupted our meeting. Slowly, they walked in suppressing their smiles and sat next to the new guy and was sitting precisely opposite me- I could see a sheen of sweat on Adira's face. A few strands of hair had escaped her ponytail and fell on her face. She looked exquisite. The men on the other end were still talking; no

one apart from Prateek and Rajbir was listening to them. The two girls were scribbling notes for each other on a notepad while the guy sitting between them smirked reading them from the corner of his eyes.

Adira looked in my direction and waved gently. I grinned like a monkey and said “Hi.” This was the exact moment when the call ended. Rajbir cleared his throat in an attempt to capture the attention of all in the room. Unwillingly, I too had to turn my attention in his direction. He stood at the end of the room. Adira and her friends adjusted their chairs, and we all now sat in a row. She was sitting next to me. I inhaled deeply.

“So, I guess most of you know why are we here.” he began.

My eyes wandered towards my neighbor. She had placed her hand on her lap and was examining her fingers. Rajbir paused for a little too long after the first statement, and I turned to look at Rajbir to know why; only to find him staring back at me arching his left eyebrow- *Caught in the act*. Thankfully, my manager decided to spare me some embarrassment and left me without a lecture.

“As the fourth person in your batch has decided to leave the organization; I have added a member of my existing team to the transitioning batch. Raunak, you need to submit your passport to the admin team tomorrow, and then we will proceed with it further.” he finished saying. Everyone took a leave from the room and like always; I was left with Prateek who was to explain to me what had just happened.

“I have been promoted” he beamed with pride.

“That’s great” I extend my hand and shook his. I was happy for him, from what I knew and had experienced- he deserved every bit of it.

“Congratulate Rajbir as well.” he added.

“As in?”

“I am your manager now, and Rajbir is your manager's manager” He explained.

“So all of us will report to you now?” I asked it was getting tougher for me to keep my eyes and mind in the room and not follow Adira as the moments

passed. Prateek kept a hand on my shoulder and took me out of the room with him. I saw Adira and both her friends standing next to Rajbir's workstation and took a breath of relief. ...*I have not lost her again.*

“Not All OF US - just you will be reporting to me along with the three new guys.” I brought my focus back to my conversation with Prateek and tried to make sense of what he had told me. A new business had been acquired and a four-member team was hired to take care of the new clients. Adira was one of them. It was an Australian client, and the new team along with their managers was to visit Australia for a month and understand the process. The technical term for it was - Transitioning. Due to a personal problem, one member of the new team had to leave the organization. The client needed only fresh graduates to work in the group which was why Rajbir chose me as a replacement.

I am going to go to Australia for a month with Adira! It was all too good to be true. The building work of grand dream castles began in my head without my permission. But first, I had to know who this overly friendly man was with whom the two girls giggled non-stop.

I decided to check with Prateek. “Why do you want to know him?” Prateek inquired. “I should know at least the names of the people I will be working with” I lied to him. The guy in Adira's batch was Angad Kapoor- this bit of information was easy to get from Prateek. He stayed in South Extension - I checked his transport roster to get his address and passed it on to Rohit when he finally called me back the same evening. “Get all the info that you can” I instructed him, Rohit is a very dependable person when it comes to such detective like activities. The next day I knew all that I wanted to know about him.

Angad Kapoor

Son Of Samarth Kapoor, Advocate- High Court

Mr. Kapoor and his only son were worth so much money that Angad did not need to be working in the company that he was working for. Advocate Samarth Kapoor was a very well known face in the Delhi's social circuit. Angad's mother was a housewife, simple and homely. Angad studied at London and had recently come back to India. He wanted to start a consulting firm of his own and decided to work at a similar place to understand what

was he getting into.

He knew Adira only at work and had a colorful reputation in the society. Fond of luxury cars, he drove a BMW to work and also owned a custom Audi R8.

There was a little more information about him which Rohit said was juicy but not indeed of any use.

Thanks to my cousin, I now knew all about my rival. Not that it made any difference as he was quite ahead of me in the game. “And by the way- he is a charmer” Rohit teased me before hanging up, and I cursed him in my mother tongue, silently; so that my mother didn't hear it.

Two Weeks Later, Indira Gandhi International Airport, New Delhi

The rest of the team was already in Australia. As I was the last person to be chosen for the team, the paperwork took forever, and they had to leave without me three days ago. My ticket and visa arrived last evening, and I was at the airport already waiting to board my flight. I arrived at the airport a little early and had to kill time roaming around. Later, after obtaining my boarding pass, I was free from my luggage and walked into a bookstore. I found many romance books beautifully lined up on the shelves but decided to pick up a book from the humor instead. It was a satire on Godmen in India and had a quirky cover.

Finally, at nine, I boarded my Jet Airways flight. It was till Singapore from where I was going to board a second plane which was to take me to Tullamarine Airport, Melbourne. The Airhostess greeted all the passengers with folded hands and a pre-rehearsed greeting.

With all the last minute formalities and late night packing, I had not managed to get enough sleep the previous night. My mother woke me up an hour before than what I asked her to wake me up at as she feared I might miss the flight which shortened my already short nap. The doors closed, I put my mobile phone in Flight mode and fastened my seat belt. The announcements began, and the Air Hostesses started with their drill. That was my first ever International flight- but instead of being happy and taking tens and hundreds of selfies; like most of the other passengers, I was bracing myself for the takeoff. I knew that kids howled at taking off due to a change in the air pressure. Next to me was a family with a small child who looked angelic as he gave me a toothless smile. The plane finally began to ascend.

Fortunately, the child's mother was well prepared. She stuffed the child's mouth with a milk bottle, and he never cried during taking off. I took out my book and began to read as sleeping was out of the question after all the hustle bustle.

Changi Airport

The first leg of my journey was over, and I was only six and a half hours away from Adira. I finished reading my book in the waiting area. It was nearly time for the next flight. I decided to sleep through the flight

I was seated in the fourth row, the seats next to me were all empty. They looked underbooked. Despite of any leg room, I managed to make myself comfortable by propping up my legs. I unpacked the blanket, adjusted the small pillows under my back and wandered into my dream world.

Tullamarine Airport, Melbourne

I straightened my back and collected my luggage from the belt; two black suitcases and a bag pack. Once I managed to get it all, I headed out. As per the last information, a chauffeur from the company was to pick me up and drop me to the apartment-hotel where everyone else was staying.

I was greeted by an Indian man who was impeccably dressed in a gray suit. He held my name card which had a wrong spelling of my name on it. The man did not look like a chauffeur at all. He greeted me in English and shook my hand. I asked him his name, “Gurjeet Singh Sir” he said and bent down to pick up my bags. “Are you a chauffeur?” I asked him as we hit the road. “Yes sir” he replied with pride and then went on to describe his pride uninvited. “There is nothing wrong with any job sir. I drive cabs as it pays well. Better than my previous job. Moreover, I like the feeling of being my boss” he said not taking his eyes off the road.

“Yes, I agree,” I said a little embarrassed by my question. No job is small; no role is insignificant. Every position has its importance in the world. Your post doesn't define you; you define yourself. The words of my grandfather came back to me. He started working as a mason and eventually left property worth lakhs behind for his family- all because of his hard work and determination. What happened to the property worth lakhs? Well, that is a different story.

I marveled at the natural beauty on both sides of the road. Long stretches of green land, fewer cars than what one is used to seeing in India and clear blue sky. It was seven in the morning, and the sun was out. The early morning sun bathed everything golden. I lowered down the glass window on my side and let the pleasantly cool breeze caress my face. It was quite like the monsoon winds. Thinking about the monsoon winds, my idle mind drifted back in time.

August 2014

New Delhi, India

One year had passed. Tamanna had just moved out of Nani's house. Her parents brought her an apartment in Greater Noida. She lived there with one of her cousin's and her younger brother. Tamanna offered Adira a space in her new home at a much lesser cost than what she was paying to Nani- The news traveled from Tamanna to Piyush to Rohit and finally to me.

"What did Adira say? Is she moving out?" I asked Rohit desperately.

"What is it to you? It is not that if she stays here, you are going to ask her out, is it?" He did not leave any opportunity to tease me. After the disaster on Adira's Birthday, I decided to move on with things at a pace which I was comfortable with. And I knew that I was not comfortable talking to her, let alone proposing her at that time.

"Tamanna asked Adira only to pay her share in the household expenses, and live with her, but Adira declined her offer as her father is not comfortable with her sharing a house with a boy, even if it is her best friend's cousin," Rohit told me after a few moments of silence.

I was happy hearing that but did not show it in front of Rohit. I remained grumpy until he said sorry for his words, which I knew he was not.

We walked idly in front of Nani's house, eating bhutta (corn) and chatting. I hoped to get a glimpse of Adira. I had not seen her for two weeks. She had gone to Chandigarh to visit her family for a week, and the day she came back, my parents decided it was time to go on a much-awaited trip to Vaishno Devi. We went by train to Punjab and halted at a relative's place while going to Jammu as well as while coming back. I prayed to Goddess Durga to give me courage and enough charm to woo the girl of my dreams.

That evening did not turn out to be fruitful as Adira locked herself in her room. Nani's help knocked her room asking her to come out for lunch as well as dinner, but she asked her to get some warm water and teainstead. I saw the help walk out of Adira's room and head towards the kitchen to prepare tea for her.

“What happened to the Madam upstairs?” I asked Nani’s help, trying to sound as casual as possible.

“I do not know. She looks unwell- cold maybe” she informed me and resumed her cooking.

It was nine at night; mummy had called me a few times already asking me to come back home for dinner. She had made chicken that evening- which was my favorite. “I will be back soon,” I told her and hung up. I dashed to the nearby medical store and came back with a few paracetamol tablets and cough drops.

Very gently I knocked the door of Adira’s room. Nani did not like any boy, even her grandsons anywhere near her PG’s room and I was playing with fire. Getting caught meant being reported to my mother, which meant danger. But I had to check on her and give her those medicines.

After a few knocks, she answered saying that the door was open. I slightly pushed the doors with my hands. The lights in the room were dimmed, and I could hardly see her. “Who is it?” she asked, her nose was stuffed, and her voice sounded funny but cute. I lifted my left leg to walk in and then placed it back on the ground; I did not want a scandal- neither for her nor myself.

“I have got some medicines, for your cold and there is one if you also have some fever,” I said standing at the door.

“Oh, thanks. Rohit is it?” she asked me. I am sure she was not able to recognize me in the dark. I did not bother to clarify; it did not matter who she thought I was. All that mattered was that she had to take the medicines as she was not well. “Nani doesn't like a guy in her PG’s room, so I am handing over the meds to the help. She will get them for you with your tea” I told her had turned my heels.

“Thanks” I heard her murmur in a sleepy voice as I headed down the stairs.

The next day, I went in the morning to check how was she feeling and whether or not she took the medicines I bought for her the previous night. To my surprise, dressed in a matching pink pajama set, she stood outside sipping tea with Rohit. She looked a little paler than usual, but her voice sounded much better than the night before. They were both chatting with ease.

“Hello Adira, how are you today” I mustered courage to blurt out the line which I practiced the entire night.

“I am good now, thanks” she answered me with a smile.

“Okay I will see you guys later,” she said and waved at me. She gently touched Rohit’s shoulders and gave him a bright smile before leaving.

“So, what was all this about?” I asked the stupidly grinning monkey who happened to be my cousin.

“She was telling me how she loves the rains and monsoon winds and that she was out in the rain with her college friends who are the reason why she caught a cold,” he said looking slyly at me.

“Okay.” I loved listening about Adira but the sight of her hand brushing his shoulder made me uncomfortable.

“And she was thanking me” he added.

“Why was she thanking you?”

“For the medicines,” he said to me shamelessly.

“What! You bastard. I was the one who got the medicines for her.”

“I know, but she thinks it was me.”

“Why did you not tell her that it wasn’t” I enquired.

“To teach you a lesson, you need to tell her things yourself,” he said and ran as fast as he could. I too ran in the same direction to beat the shit out of him.

He was the least fit person I knew, and as expected he was panting like a dog by the time we reached the end of the lane. I caught hold of him by his collar. “Achoooo” he sneezed loudly. It looked like Adira’s flu had passed on to him. “God has his ways, my friend. Enjoy the flu.” I said and walked back home. He deserved the cold he had got- a little punishment for hiding the truth. That day on, I believe in Karma.

“Achoooo...”The chauffeur’s sneeze brought me back to Melbourne.

Melbourne CBD

“Welcome to the city sir,” Gurjeet said looking at me in the rearview mirror and gave me a warm smile.

I looked around, unlike the places we crossed to reach our destination; the city was full of people and buildings. There were trams and buses everywhere. It was quite early in the morning, yet; I could see men and women dressed in their best clothes, out on the street- most of them were headed to work. Melbourne at first glance looks like a super fast-paced city. Tourists, professionals and college groups could be seen everywhere; there was so much happening all at once.

Melbourne is indeed a fantastic blend of the old and the modern world. There are museums and libraries which co-exist with modern infrastructural marvels; all on the same road, giving each other company, making each other more enchanting. It is a blend of so many cultures; one can find faces in the busy crowds which were distinctively different from one another- different races and cultures make the beautiful place all the more beautiful as well as appealing.

“So, this is CBD is it?” I asked

“Yes, and you are going to love it” Gurjeet said with pride.

I was too busy to love the place then, but I must tell you that I did fall in love with the place eventually. It is a comforting place, as reassuring as a warm cup of coffee on an icy cold evening. It made a special place in my heart, and I would cherish every moment spent there; all my life.

I was off for the day and had to join the rest of the team at work the next day. We parked outside a hotel, and Gurjeet helped me take my luggage in. I read the name of the hotel just before making an entry into it- Punthill Apartment Hotel, Flinders Street. I was given a card for my apartment, and a valet took my luggage upstairs, to the fifth floor. The company had made arrangements for us in a way that two people were to stay in one serviced apartment together. Before you get any ideas, let me tell you that I am not that lucky. Adira and the other girl who I was yet to meet appropriately were staying together. I was to share my apartment with a guy- who was it? I was not

aware of it till then.

Room Number 530

Punthill Apartment Hotel

The red-haired valet and I reached the fifth floor. I place my white key card on the reader and the door unlocked. He escorted me and my luggage in. It was quite a decent place. We walked into a spacious living room. A brown colored six seater leather couch and a beautiful wooden center table made the room comfortable and cozy. In front of the sofa were two big glass windows which gave an incredible view of the calm Yarra river. There was a large TV, a dining table as well as a few abstract paintings in the room making it look full.

My valet asked me where to keep the bags, and I signaled towards the corner of the room. I now know that I was supposed to tip him before dismissing him, but at that point, all I wanted was to sleep and couldn't understand why he was delaying his exit. His hopes of getting a tip died after a few moments, and he finally left me alone in the room. I do not recall much of what I did later or what I saw, all I remember is that I dragged my feet to the other room which was not separated from the rest of the apartment by any door and crashed on the bed with my face touching the pillow; my legs were hanging over the bed.

Four P.M.

I woke up with a jolt after a bad dream. I saw myself hanging from a parachute as there was a problem with the flight I was in. The flight attendants asked us all to fold our legs, as soon as I did so, my seat flung into the sky, and I was dropping freely. When I woke up, I realized that I was still dressed in the same set of clothes which I had put on the previous morning and was sweating profoundly after the nightmare. I was in dire need of a warm shower. I got up from the bed and wiped the drool from the corner of my mouth- *I must have been sleeping like a baby. I am so thirsty.* There was a glass and a jug of water next to my bed. I took a few sips of water and felt instant relief. Finally, for the first time, I looked around me at the bedroom. It was spacious and very aesthetically decorated. Not a lot of furniture was dumped into it; There were only two single beds and two side tables. Opposite my bed, there was a big glass window which gave me the view of the Flinders Street train station. I did notice a few clothes lying on the other bed and assumed that they belonged to my new housemate, there was a formal shirt, a pair of trousers and a black tie. Looking at the clothes, I knew that I was probably not paired with Prateek. His clothes would be bigger for sure, owing to his size. I was either paired up with Rajbir or Angad. Honestly, I would have preferred Prateek over both of them. As it was one of the two, I hoped it was Angad as living with Rajbir for almost a month would be a nightmare.

Behind my head was a wall and on it was a painting of a flower which at first glance looked like a heart to me. This is the thing with the human brain- it shows you what you want to see everywhere.

I walked up to the window and thought of how life had planned everything for me, my meeting with Adira, her working at my office, my coming to Melbourne with her. This is your only chance, Ronnie. You guys are away from everyone; you need to seize the opportunity. I encouraged myself. Ideally, I should have come to Australia with a plan, but I did not. Why? Because I had recently learned that you do not always need a plan. Sometimes all that you need is a little trust. Trust what life has offered you, take a deep breath and let go of all the inhibitions. Once you do that- life presents to you all the miracles it is capable of.

This was precisely what I was going to do, relax and let life take control of its self. I tried to control my life many times, and it hardly did me any good. I wanted to try it the other way round for a change.

By six in the evening, I had taken a much-needed shower, changed into the fresh set of clothes and made a call to my mother who was only concerned about my food. "I have had some sandwiches ma" I assured her and started describing the view from my window. My mother, however, was stuck at the word "sandwiches." For the next five minutes, she gave me a lecture on my careless eating habits. I promised her to eat something after the call, and that is when she left the topic. At six thirty there was a knock at the door, I was stuffing my mouth with a red velvet cake sitting in front of the TV set when the door opened, and I saw my roommate standing at the door. Some tiny pieces of cake which were in my mouth found themselves abandoned on the carpet as I sprang up from the couch. It was Rajbir. "Sir.."I said which sounded more like "fur" with all the stuffing in my mouth.

"I see that you have made yourself comfortable already, haven't you?" his tone was sarcastic. I did not make any attempt to say anything more as my mouth was still full of cake which refused to go in without a gulp of coffee that lay untouched on the table. Leaving me in the company of food, Rajbir walked into the bedroom.

Fifteen minutes later, Rajbir and I sat at the dining table facing each other. He looked relaxed in his PJs. I fiddled with a piece of decorative, waiting for him to begin a conversation. I would have preferably shared my space with Angad so that I had one less thing to worry about but life threw me a bouncer when I was the least prepared for it. "So how was your flight?" he finally asked me taking his eyes off his phone. "It was good, thanks" there was nothing more to add there. His phone rang, it was Prateek. The team had decided to go out and eat south Indian food for dinner that evening. "Chao let's go," Rajbir said as soon as we were dressed. We locked the door behind us. Adira and her friend whose name was Sakshi too came out of their room. They were staying next door to us.

Adira was dressed in a baby blue dress, her hair was tied in a bun, and she looked beautifully carefree and relaxed. Sakshi too was dressed in something similar; I do not recall what it was as I had eyes only for Adira. She extended her hand to greet me. "How was the flight?" she asked me casually as I

placed my hand in hers. Her soft palms touched mine, and it felt like something beyond words. I froze at the contact, and I bet she noticed it. I saw her blush; her cheeks changed colors. Later I wondered if that was just another trick my mind played, Why would she blush at a touch from you? Look at her and look at you. She is perfect while you are anything but perfect for her. I came back to my senses when I felt Rajbir's eyes on me; I was still holding Adira's hand.

At the restaurant, I was quite during most of the dinner mainly because I was very conscious of Rajbir's attentiveness towards my actions. Somehow, he caught me every time I looked at Adira and raised his eyebrows. His reaction made me very nervous. I dropped everything which came into contact with my hand beginning a series of jokes on people who are all thumbs. Adira was her usual chirpy self; she laughed at every joke Angad made. Her closeness with Angad made me uncomfortable, and I was unable to eat properly. "You have hardly eaten" Sakshi commented on my barely touched plate, and I blamed my lack of appetite on Jet Lag. Finally, Rajbir paid the bill. Three meals every day were to be paid by the company for every employee, and that dinner too went on to the same account.

In gloom and silence, I accompanied my team back to the hotel, and we all dispersed into our rooms quickly as it was quite late by then. I avoided Rajbir for as long as I could, but then he caught me in the living area. "So, Adira told me that you guys know each other for quite a while" I just nodded praying that soon he would move on from the topic owing to lack of response and interest from my end but Rajbir had other plans. "Does she know how you feel about her?" he asked me up front and I looked at him wide-eyed. He was smirking at me, and I felt a sudden pang in my heart, I was upset with him for making fun of me when he hardly knew anything about Adira or me. "You do not know anything about all this sir, and moreover this is my personal life, and I do not wish to share to with anyone". I wondered which of my action or reactions gave Rajbir a hint of my feelings for Adira. I got up from the couch and went into the bedroom. Surprisingly, Rajbir followed me there. I picked up my book on Godmen and pretended to be reading it. He did not disturb me in my pretense and quietly slid into his duvet, turned off the bright light beside his bed. *Have I offended him? Well, he asked for it. He is my manager at work, and my knowing Adira has nothing to do with my work. Or does it?* I was so confused. Staring at the funny looking baba on the

cover of the book, I decided to say sorry to him for my behavior and clear the air first thing the next morning. He was my manager after all and did not deserve such a tone from me.

I do not know when, but I fell asleep soon while recalling my tryst with a Godman.

October 2015
New Delhi, India

Nothing in my life was going as per my plans- I wondered if making any plans ever, made any sense. My studies were all haywire and Adira had found a boyfriend. It was a week ago when Rohit broke the news to me that Adira was dating a man who dropped her back to Nani's house from her college quite frequently in his white Swift Dezire. The worst thing was that this courting was arranged by her parents- yes, she was meeting a man whom her parents thought to be good enough for her to get married to. The rumor mills had it that the good-looking pair was to get married as soon as she finished her studies- provided of course if all went well between the two. I was broken- my heart was in pieces; so many that I stopped caring to count. I knew that I had taken forever to tell her how I felt for her but I had my reasons. I was very low on confidence and was scared that she would never give me a chance to prove my love for her. I tried to forget her. Little did I know that my feelings for her were seeds when I buried them deep in my heart to forget her- they grew into love.

I indulged in drinking and occasional smoking. An intoxication of any kind gave me no relief as her face remained in front of my eyes all the time and the fact that she was going to be someone's wife in a few months time pricked my eyes and made them tear unwarned. I bunked college on the days when I had to attend classes as per the pact. Soon my only two college friends too left my side.

I thought alcohol will kill my love for her. But the truth is that true love never dies. It sleeps silently in aching hearts and wakes up on lonely nights. Night was what I dreaded the most. I started sharing my sorrows with Rohit but he too was on the brink of getting too frustrated to care. "Why did she do this to me yaar?" I asked him one drunk night on the roof of his house.

"She did nothing; the fact is that you also did nothing when you could" his words were harsh but true, and I agreed. "Can I do something now? Do you think if I tell her how I feel for her, would she be interested? Do you think I stand a chance at all?"

"Are you crazy? Have you seen the guy her parents have chosen for her?"

why did all his words make sense that night? The guy was rich, good looking and from what I saw from afar; he cared for her too. “What if I tell this guy that Adira and I are having an affair and he should get out of the way. No one wants to get married to someone else’s girlfriend!”

“Listen to yourself, you have stooped so bloody low. How can you think of lying? Moreover, I do not think he will believe you. This is not a movie. Only a miracle can work for you. As we know there is no such thing in the world as a miracle, so it is better that you move on now....” he continued his lecture.

“Miracle, miracle...” I repeated a few times before passing out.

The next day when I woke up, the word miracle was still stuck in my head. I was sleeping on a folding bed on the rooftop. Rohit was snoring next to me on the floor. His father and mother were downstairs. It was quite early in the morning, so instead of waking up my Gyaani cousin, I formulated a plan. *A lot of Godmen claim to help lovers through some small updates. Lovers like me-the ones who love with all their heart one-sided, my kind of overs approach such chamatkari Godmen to get the love of their life to love them back, and then they live happily ever after-* Magic was the only thing I could count upon under my circumstances. I decided to find one such baba on the internet and see if he could help me.

In the afternoon, I stepped out of the house with a telephone number scribbled on a small piece of crumpled paper and called the Baba. His secretary picked up the call and asked me to let her know the problem. I told her my sad story keeping in mind to change the names of all the major characters. “Come and meet us at our office,” she said after listening to my saga of love, as I would like to call it. “And get at least thirty strands of hair of the girl you love,” she told me before hanging up. I had heard stories of how Godmen did magic with hair and clothes etc. *It is not a big deal; it is just hair-* I told my scared heart who was not very sure of what I was getting myself and Adira into.

I had lunch at home, Rohit called a few times to check on me as I had left his house in a hurry that morning. I assured him that all was fine. After lunch, I decided to go to Nani’s home to complete the mission. I tipped toe on the stairs and reached Adira’s room. A dustbin was kept outside the room, and I

hoped to find my treasure in it- *thirty or more strands of her hair*. The door was closed, *great! That would make my work easy*. I lifted the lid and scanned the contents of the bin with a lot of concentration leaving aside the disgust.

Suddenly, I heard a voice coming from Adira's room; she was not alone. Tamanna was with her, and she sounded outraged, "What a swine! How could he?" I froze as soon as I heard her. *Hurry up-* The mind said, *Or you will get caught peeping in the dustbin like a starving cat*.

"Do not talk about him please Tamanna. I tried to keep him happy, but he said that I was not worth his time and that he is calling it off" Adira was weeping, her voice was low, the saddest I had ever heard her. I left the task and hand and ran down the stairs; her words echoed in my head. *She is going through so much, and I am such an ass. Thinking about only my self*. I loathed my reflection in the mirror for what I had become. I was planning to do magic on the girl I proclaimed to be in love with. I never thought about her, her feelings, her emotions. I stayed away from Adira for the next many days I could not afford even meet my own eyes in the mirror. I was thankful that I had not disclosed this dirty little secret to anyone and it will go with me to the grave- I had no intentions of ever sharing it with anyone either.

The sound of my vibrating phone brought me back to my present- to my apartment in Melbourne. I woke up with a ringing alarm and checked my watch; it said one thirty. I looked outside, and it was sunny already, It cant be one thirty in the morning. I checked my phone- seven a.m. It finally occurred to me that I had not adjusted my watch to the local time while the telephone adjusted its clock on its own. I looked at Rajbir's bed. It was neatly made up, and he was nowhere to be seen. I wondered if he had already left for work. I had to reach eight and the office was only ten minutes walk from the hotel. I picked up my shaving kit and walked into the washroom. On the mirror was a note for me-

It can be just One day or Day One... It is for you to decide. Meet me in the coffee shop if you are ready for Day one- Rajbir

I read and re-read the confusing note.

Rajbir sat alone in the corner of the fancy coffee shop on the ground floor of the building. He had chosen a table overlooking the street. He was staring at something outside very intently and did not notice my arrival. "Good morning sir," I said to bring him back from wherever he had mentally escaped to. "Good morning," he said turning his face towards me. I noticed an empty cup of coffee on the table and wondered how early he must have got up to have dressed up and even have had a cup of coffee before seven fifteen in the morning while I had skipped my shower to be there. *I did take a shower last evening-* A perfect excuse was handy. I was dressed up in a formal brown shirt and beige trousers and rushed downstairs to know if the note meant what I thought it did, and if so- I was ready to make it Day one.

I took a seat opposite Rajbir and placed his note on the table. "So are you ready?" he asked me the obvious question. "I am ready for something, but I am not sure if we are talking about the same thing" I answered. "I am talking about Adira" he stated coolly and looked at me. "Me too" I responded and then asked him the question I had been itching to ask, "Why do you want to help me, sir?" It was bizarre for a manager to call a colleague, many years his junior to a coffee shop so that they could discuss a girl. I had never discussed Adira with anyone other than Rohit and felt very awkward sitting in front of Rajbir.

"I want to help you out here because I know that you need me, also because I know I can and most importantly because I know I should."

I looked at him blankly and he went on to tell me a story.

“So, there was this boy- very happy and jovial. He was adored by his friends, both boys as well as girls. He had a friend whom he knew every since he knew himself. She was his neighbor and classmate. They spent their evenings together playing and fighting as kids and discussing studies, exams and tuition classes as teenagers. The boy knew that he loved this girl- very much” he said with a pause and removed an invisible piece of thread from his trousers distracting me. He cleared his throat and continued, “He believed that the girl also loved him, as much as he loved her if not more. But they never spoke about it. They finished school and joined different colleges. Naturally, they met new friends- the guy, because of his smooth talks and confidence befriended girls easily. He knew how to woo them, and soon he had more than a few girlfriends. In short, he was an ass hole.” He laughed a sad laugh and moved his eyes back to the road.

“And then?” I prompted him.

“Then one day, this girl saw the boy with one of his many girlfriends. He had never told her how much he loved her. She assumed that he didn’t and that she was in a one-sided love affair. She stopped talking to the boy. All his charms and tactics failed in front of the girl he loved. She agreed to get married to an NRI who lives in U.K. and went away from his life forever within three months.

“What happened to the boy sir?” I couldn't help but ask the fate of the boy who could not confess his feelings in time.

“He dies a death every night thinking about her, recalling the times she let him touch her palms, the times when they gazed together at stars and wished one would fall so that they could wish for togetherness for eternity- without telling each other. The boy still stalks her Facebook account to get a glimpse of her smile, the smile which could have been for him but now belongs to a man whom she would have never even met had he not been an idiot to hide his love from her. She looks happy in her new life but not as happy as the boy could have kept her. He wanted to get the moon for her once, and now he looks at the moon and tries to see her face in it.”

“How are you so sure that the girl loved the boy? She agreed to get married to this NRI” I was getting braver with my questions.

“I know because she told me she did. Before she left she wrote to -*When I am gone, don't look for me. A part of me will always be with you; you carry my heart in your heart.* She told me how much she loved me and how she thought I did too. I tried to convince her that I did love her but she was in no mood to listen. I can't blame her; it was all my fault. I took her love for granted” I was shocked listening to the confession of my manager’s manager and saw the smart and intelligent Rajbir crumple in front of me.

Suddenly, I felt as if someone had hit me hard. What if Adira gets married too? I need to give myself a chance. I do not know if she will say a yes or a no, but until I ask her, I will never find out.

“Sir, I do not think that you and I have anything in common and neither do our stories,” I told him sadly. I was shy and introvert while Rajbir was nothing like me.

“I know, I have observed you enough,” he said, and he gave me a life lesson which I can never forget-

The answer is no until you ask. When you ask you give Yes a chance to become the answer. There is a fifty percent probability that the odds turn in your favor.

“Give Adira a chance to choose between a Yes or a No for you, for your love story, instead of choosing a No yourself. I am sure you would have heard a saying that an Oops is way better than What if. I am a What if- What if I had asked her out? What if I had told her about my feelings. Do not be me.” His words made me see him in a new light.

“Come on now, time to go to work. We shall continue this when we get back to the apartment in the evening. Till then try and think of the reasons why you think you love her and make up your mind to give it a genuine shot. The mind governs it all. If your mind tells you that you can do it- trust me nothing can stop you” His advice gave me a lot to think about. That day, during my breaks I found myself making mental notes of what I loved the most about Adira - the list was endless. The rest of my day went by in catching up with the batch. Samantha-a tall, blonde trainer took me through the modules I had missed.

“We are planning to go to a Melbourne Central for some shopping, does

anyone want to come along?” the girls asked in chorus on our way back. I looked at Rajbir who told me not to accompany them. Rajbir, Prateek and I headed back to our apartments while Angad accompanied Sakshi and Adira to the mall.

I felt a little insecure once they left and Rajbir sensed that I was not at ease. “All okay tiger?” he asked me. “Hmmm... just that I feel that Adira likes this guy - Angad, a lot” I replied sulking.

“Yes, she does seem to be very fond of him. But do keep this thing in your mind forever that jealousy takes you nowhere. She has a life, she has and will always have friends some of them will be men while some will be women. If you want to win her, the first thing is that you need to do is to chuck the word insecurity out of your dictionary. I understand that girls like their guys to be involved and a little insecurity is cute but just in the beginning. As the relationship grows, it is this insecurity which causes most of the harm. As a man, be confident of your effect on your woman and trust her enough to let her make friends.”

“But we are not in a relationship yet.” I corrected him.

“Exactly! You are not even in a relationship with her, and you have a problem with her friends. Just imagine how quickly this will drive the girl away.” He was right but old habits die hard. I did resolve to work on it though.

Rajbir ordered our dinner in the room, and we began discussing my favorite topic again, Adira.

“So, did you think about the things you like in her?” he asked, and I rolled my eyes. This was the only thing I thought about the entire day, and this was the only thing I think about every day.

“Yes, I did. I like her face- she is so beautiful that no words in the world can describe her...” I began.

“Woah! Calm down, my friend. The list is for you not for me. I need not know everything.” he playfully kept his hands on his ears. *So dumb of me-* I thought and joined his laughter.

“So, the lesson here is that you should say it when you feel like saying it. A girl likes a guy who can express. Moreover, the words that you don't say eat you out alive. They make you miserable by being stuck somewhere between your heart and tongue. Give her a genuine compliment, but something that she is not aware of. Guys notice small things but state only the obvious. Tell her about the small things that you find very attractive in her”

“Okay,” I said thinking about my problem, “What is It?” Rajbir asked as if reading my mind.

“Nothing, just that I can not have a conversation with her. Words fail me, the moment I see her, even my mind stops functioning” my response made him giggle. I was happy to provide him some entertainment at my cost but not at that moment. He stopped his giggle train after a while to begin talking, “I know that. I am not asking you to be super chatty. Just think of one thing you love about her, frame a sentence and tell it to her, quietly, with sincere eyes and a playful smile.”

Hmmmm.. This I can manage- I thought and started working on my first compliment.

The Next Day

I went to work with a compliment on repeat mode in my mind. *I shall say it to her the moment I see her*- I decided. But nothing goes as per the plan, does it? I sat next to her all through the training; the group had lunch together, I had more than a few chances to tell her and yet I couldn't - Why? Because Rajbir and I had to first work on a bigger problem with me; he forgot to address the biggest worry of my life- my confidence level.

I reached our apartment in the evening, sad and depressed. "You could not manage to say a single word to her, did you?" Rajbir asked. "No, I could not because you and I ignored the main problem."

"And what is that if I may ask?" he was getting all sarcastic again and I wondered if sharing anything with him was a good idea in the first place. But then he was my only hope; he was there to help me, selflessly. "Yes, you may. It is my confidence." I told him plainly.

"Who says that I ignored the biggest hurdle in your path? I knew that you are very low on confidence the day we met for the first time."

"And don't you think for someone so low on confidence it is not possible to give a compliment to a girl like Adira?" I failed to understand what was he trying to do there.

"I knew you would not be able to say anything, but I wanted you to realize this before we do anything about it." he was getting confusing minute by minute. "Okay, so if someone tells you that you have something which you should work upon; or let me say if I tell you that your walk is not that impressive- I think you should change it, what do we feel about my comment?" he quizzed me.

"I think that all this is uncalled for and my walk has nothing wrong with it. I do not know what are you trying to imply here" I was getting tired of his games.

"Exactly! Whenever someone points towards an area of improvement, we instantly dislike the person, his comment and we never feel that it was meant for our good. It is only when we realize that we have a thing that needs sorting; we seek help."

Does my walk need sorting? Is it not impressive? What is a remarkable walk by the way? - These questions ran through my head “Okay fine. So, I have realized it. What can we do about it?” I asked him thinking about my walk and referring to my confidence.

“Obviously we need to work on it. Confidence is not something that comes to anyone within days, weeks or even months. It takes years for a person to build their confidence levels. You, however, do not have so much time.”

He paused to sip water from a bottle kept on the wooden table in the living area. Looking at him gulping down water, I realized that I was dehydrated too and picked up the second bottle lying on the table. Replacing the cap on the bottle, he continued. “Remember one thing - Fake it till you make it!”

Now, what is that supposed to mean? I looked at him, cluelessly; like always.

“You will have to work on your self-confidence. It will take time, but you will be there eventually. But until this “Eventually” happens fake confidence.”

“But how?” I asked exasperatedly.

“Before you look into her eyes to compliment her tomorrow, first imagine you and her at a happy place. Where is your happy place? A place where you will be the happiest- like mine is on top of a mountain where there is no one to disturb me. I can feel the wind on my face. The smell of trees and flowers around me, make me relax. Whenever I am tensed, I close my eyes and go to my happy place- for a few seconds. These seconds help me relax and when I open my eyes again- I feel happy as well as confident..”

Rajbir gave me another task for the evening, I had to think of a happy place and when I met Adira the next day; I had to revisit my comfortable place to get my confidence- a fake one to help me achieve something real.

My Happy Place.

December 29th, 2015

My Happy Place

After she broke up with the guy her parents had chosen for her, Adira became socially alienated. Tamanna had become quite seriously involved with Piyush which left Adira with hardly any friends. I tried to stay away from her as much as I could, but I did go to Nani's house a few times in the month. Sadly, every time I went there, I found her locked in her room either listening to songs or studying. Nani got a new maid who was quite a chatterbox. She used to tell me and everyone else all that went into the house. As per her the Madam living upstairs was an emotional wreck. She was always either crying in her room or staring at nothing whenever the help went there to give her food. "She is so pale and thin because she hardly eats anything," she told me one day and then went on with her banter about a neighbor's dog.

"This is it." I told Rohit the same evening, "We need to do something about it."

"And what is that?" Rohit asked me.

"I do not know. I am open to suggestions." I looked towards Rohit for a solution.

"I guess if Adira spends some time with her friends, away from the place where she met this guy then she will relax and come out of her Devdas mode."

I was impressed with his idea, but we did not know how to go about it, so we contacted Piyush- the man who had a solution to most of the problems in the world.

"I think you guys should meet Tamanna and tell her what you heard from the help. She will be able to take it from there." Piyush suggested, and we paused our conversation until Tamanna joined in.

As suggested by Piyush, Rohit and I met Tamanna at her house and told her what the help had told us. "How could she? Tell your Nani, to fire her! This woman has no rights to spread rumors about my friend!" We were amazed at her reaction. All wrong words come out of her mouth, we expected her to say

things like - Oh my God, My friend needs some time away. Do I need to plan a vacation for her? Will you guys come along?

“I think she did the right thing by telling us and you must worry about Adira and not stress about getting the help fired,” Rohit told her in a stern voice, and we saw the expressions on Tamanna’s face change as she realized the gravity of the matter. “I think she should take a vacation to take her mind off things.” Piyush stole my lines, and I stood there looking at him with angrily. It was the time I was to make an impression on her friend who was then to tell her best friend Adira how sweet, caring and compassionate I was.

Tamanna did not say much after that and Piyush shooed us away, subtly; from her house after half an hour of silence. Later, he told us that Tamanna had in fact considered his suggestion and both Tamanna and Adira are going on a holiday to Goa.

“Are you going along?” I asked him the obvious question.

“They will be staying at a five-star hotel, and if I go along I will have to pay for all the expenses” he had a good reason not to go. “But I do plan to go there and surprise Tamanna in the middle of their week-long vacation, and I shall come back to Delhi with them.”

Going to Goa for some time away from the chaotic world is everyone’s dream- Rohit and I were no different. We begged Piyush to take us along, and he agreed after a little persuasion but not without a condition- We had to pay for his lodging as well. The girls had booked Novotel in North Goa. Opposite Novotel, there were a few houses. The owners of these homes gave bikes on rent to tourists as well as lent their spare rooms for a few days at minimal cost. Piyush had arranged his stay in one of the rooms in a house opposite Novotel. It's rent was two hundred rupees a night for a single person. We made phone calls and changed the arrangement to - three hundred rupees a night for three nights for three people.

Rohit and I paid the sum to Piyush in advance, and he booked our flight tickets from Delhi to Goa on a budget airline. “You guys can pay me for your share of ticket money in installments.” The generous cousin told us, and we found ourselves doing nothing but dreaming about our great Goan holiday for many days to come.

I took some advance pocket money from my mother who was not very pleased with my decision of going on a holiday without family. For a change, my father was happy that I was finally acting like a grown up. With his help, I managed to get two thousand rupees from my mother- the most significant sum of money she had ever handed over to me, to be spent on me, by me and for me.

Finally, Adira and Tamanna left for their vacation. Every day; Rohit and I went through Tamanna's Facebook account to get a glimpse of it. Rohit and Tamanna were friends on Facebook, and we got a minute by minute account of the girls. From the pictures, one could tell that they were both enjoying themselves, carefree and happy. But again who posts sad images on Facebook?

Three days went by very painfully and we finally flew to Goa to surprise the girls. "Okay listen, Tamanna is my girlfriend and Adira is her friend. Only I am here to surprise them. The two of you can meet them once in a while but try and maintain as much distance as possible. I do not want to creep them out." Piyush gave us strict instructions as soon as we boarded the flight.

"I will be out of your way; In fact, I do not wish to see you and your boring girlfriend at all on my trip. Tell this Majnu (lover)" Rohit said pointing his fingers towards me.

"I am here to enjoy myself and not to creep anyone out" I blurted in one go and quickly shut my eyes for the rest of the flight.

We reached Goa in one and a half hours, and it took us another one hour from the airport to reach our destination. As soon as we got down of the auto, Rohit whistled loudly. Both of us turned to see what was it that caught our man's attention to find him whistling at the hotel opposite our rooms. "They are so lucky to be staying there. I want to go in too" Rohit changed his stand on not meeting the girls quicker than how a Chameleon changes colors. "No," Piyush said in a cold tone and Rohit's face fell.

Piyush went to surprise his girlfriend two hours later; I stood at the window of our room hoping that Adira would accompany the lovebirds to where ever they were headed for the evening. Thankfully, she did. Dressed in a yellow-colored maxi dress, she strolled looking quite relaxed with Tamanna and

Piyush towards Candolim Beach. Rohit and I followed them for reasons of our own- Rohit wanted to go to the hotel while I needed to get some time in Adira's company.

We spotted them walking into a shack - Palms and sands. It was five in the evening, and not a lot of people were there at our side of the beach at that hour. We saw a few foreigners spread on beach beds; They looked as if they had passed out while trying to get some tan on their otherwise pale skins. "Act surprised" I told Rohit who was brimming with hope. "yes of course" he assured me as we climbed up the wooden stairs to reach the covered dining space.

I spotted the trio sitting at a table at the end and we strolled casually towards them. Tamanna spotted us first, and by the look on her face, I could tell that she was not very pleased with our arrival. Rohit and I took the table next to them hoping that we would be called over for a conversation, which did not happen of course. Tamanna tried to ignore us, Piyush looked at us as if we had grown two heads each while Adira was busy playing with a stray dog who had managed to walk in.

Five minutes later, Rohit decided to take matters into his hand and went to their table. The girls reluctantly invited us to join them, which pissed Piyush further. I moved my chair next to Adira in a hope to be able to talk to her. She looked at me with her sad eyes. I could see the emptiness in them. She waited for me to say something but when I could manage nothing. She said "Hi" and moved her eyes away before I could even respond. My hopes crumbled silently between us. I looked down at my palms and wondered what had a heartbreak done to the bubbly girl whom I had first met a couple of years ago.

After a while, Adira got up and excused herself. She walked down the stairs, towards the beach. The Sun had come down; it was about to set. I too left my seat and walked up to the stairs but did not follow her. I saw her walking along the beach, with her slippers in her hand. The water came and touched her beautiful feet as if the sea was kissing her, to heal her, to help her come out of her sadness and hug life. Slowly, as minutes passed by, the orange sun melted into the deep blue ocean coloring the sky in different shades of red- the color of love. As it melted into its lover- the ocean and the sun became one and the place started going darker giving them the privacy they needed.

Distant rays fell on Adira's face making it look all the more beautiful. All I could hear were loud waves rising and falling like a song, all my eyes could see was Adira; at a distance. She closed her eyes to savor the beauty of love, and I closed mine to freeze the moment forever, and this has been my happy place ever since.

Next Day, Melbourne

The next day, I woke up at three and went out to catch the morning sun. The streets were crowded with buildings; making it impossible for anyone to get a glimpse of the sun in the most beautiful hour of the day. So, I woke up early and took an Uber to a place called Mt. Ridley Road. It was quite far from the city, but from what I had heard from an Indian colleague at work, it was the best place to be to witness the rising sun in Melbourne skies. It presented the natural beauty of hills and valleys on one side and contrast of sky-high buildings at the other.

“Why are you up at such ungodly hour in the morning?” my Bangladeshi Uber driver asked me jokingly as we nearly reached my destination.

“I need some clean air, and some time just for myself,” I told him honestly.

We bid each other goodbye after an hour-long journey, and there I stood, all alone at a point from where the dim city lights were visible to my right, and the beautiful bronze sky was right in front of me. I saw the sun rise and color the dark sky in bright shades. The city lights were replaced by buildings. It was a beautiful sight and my lack of words to be able to describe the scene in front of me; makes it all the more beautiful in my memories. The alarm on my phone beeped- it was six thirty. I had been sitting there for almost two and a half hours. It was time for me to go back. I closed my eyes to freeze the moment in my memories and suddenly the flash of my happy moment too came in front of me- Adira walking along the beach. I took a deep breath and took out my phone to book another Uber to head back to the city.

On my way back, I wished that someday; just someday I would be able to hold Adira in my arms and witness the sunrise instead of clutching on to my phone.

When I walked back into the apartment; my mind was made up. I went straight into the shower, dressed up in my formal clothes and joined the rest of the team in the coffee shop. Adira and Sakshi were still not there. Angad, Rajbir, and Prateek sat at Rajbir’s favorite corner table talking merrily. I joined them and patiently waited for Adira to arrive. I was not sure by then what was I to say to her, but taking Rajbir’s advice into account- I did plan to go to my happy place before beginning the conversation with her. Also, I

intended to brighten up her day with a genuine and heartfelt compliment.

Five minutes later, the girls arrived at the coffee shop announcing their arrival with the noises of their high heels clanging against the wooden floor. Adira was dressed in a formal blue dress and wore a blazer. Her hair was tied in a pony she looked like the morning sun, bright, warm and enigmatic. I stood up at their arrival and offered my seat to her. She smiled at me and instantly I felt all the confidence which the morning sun gave me, fizzle out of my body. Not the right time- I scolded myself and closed my eyes to come out of it. I regained my confidence and opened my eyes to see her sitting there, as pretty as a picture, looking at me. I dragged another chair to sit next to her. Her smell invaded my senses as I leaned closer to her. I could feel my heart thumping so hard that it could have ripped out of my chest had it tried. I could see her ear, small solitaires dazzling perfectly on to her little earlobes. “The color suits you very well” I heard myself say in a low voice. She turned around to face me. “Thanks” she said brightly and tilted her head to the right. Just when everything was perfect, Angad got up, and everyone else followed him. Rajbir gave me a wicked smile as I felt my face change color.

The day at work was good too. We had our first day of on the job training. Adira and I had our lunch break together thanks to Rajbir. Strangely, I found talking to her was easier that day than it had ever been in the past. Rajbir’s advice was working- I was elated. During our walk back from work Adira declared that she was getting bored of sitting in her room all evening. “Why don’t we all go out tonight?” she asked turning around and walked backward. “To where?” Angad asked her with excitement written all over his face. “I do not know yet; we will plan something out. Sakshi and I are going, who all want to accompany us? Raunak, do you want to come along?” I was thrilled to be asked out by her. I squeaked a yes and grinned at her as foolishly as I could manage. Rajbir placed his arm on my shoulder hinting something, but I was too engrossed in the planning with everyone else to pay any heed to his signs.

By the time we reached our apartment, it was decided that Adira, Sakshi, Angad and I were going to St. Kilda beach. I rushed into the bathroom to change into something more casual.

“You are not going” Rajbir declared from outside the bathroom a minute later.

“What?” I was annoyed as well as baffled at his declaration. I quickly wrapped a towel around my waist and came out of the bathroom holding my T-shirt in one hand.

“Why should I not go?” I asked him again in the bedroom.

“Do I need to explain this?” he asked looking at me in the eye.

“Yes please” I was unable to understand why he thought that it was a bad idea to go out with the girl I loved.

“Okay so you first tell me what is going on here, as per you.”

“I had a nice day. I complimented Adira on her dress. We took our breaks together, and at the end of the day, she asked me to accompany her to the beach as she gets bored in the hotel doing nothing” It was so obvious and I wondered why Rajbir was finding it difficult to understand. He gave out a cruel laugh.

“Let me tell you what just happened here. You had a nice day and all that Blaah Blaah..” he moved his hands in the air as if making clouds around his chest and then continued his painful talk, “Adira, on the other hand, found another person whom she can be friends with. She gets bored and wants to go out in the evening, with her friends. Mind you - the most important word in my entire sentence is Friends. She thinks that she has found a new friend in you which is why she asked you too.”

I was still unable to figure out what exactly was Rajbir implying. “So? Every love story begins with friendship. If you are trying to say that she sees me as a potential friend, then I want to tell you that it is a good sign; as per me. Have you never heard- Love is friendship?” I repeated the famous dialogue from the movie Kuch Kuch Hota Hai and Rajbir smirked a little more.

“Love is friendship- but only in movies. Come out of Bollywood tiger and smell the coffee. Have you ever noticed that in real life most of the love stories end at friendship? Guys like you are so easily friend-zoned.” he told me, and I looked at him wondering what to say.

“See, I am not discouraging you from going out with Adira. In fact, I want you to go out with her but not as friends. You need to make her see you

differently than the way she sees her other male friends. As per me, if a guy is friend-zoned it is his fault. You have to look into her eyes and say - *I dream about you way too often for us to be just friends.*" he declared. "How do I tell her to not see me as a friend?" I asked him.

"Firstly, be exclusive. You are not a part of her friend circle so do not be in it until the status of your relationship is confirmed. Once you win her over and you guys begin dating; you can always join her friend circle as her boyfriend."

Be Exclusive- But how? I did not have to ask Rajbir to elaborate on anything. He began his gyaan on his own- "You need to tell Adira in your way that you are interested in her friendship but not as only a friend. Do not go out with her in groups. If you do so, she will not be able to see you as you are. You will be a part of the herd, and one day a guy who is out of her circle of friends will sweep her off her feet, and you will end up accompanying her to places to shop for her wedding" I bowed my head down recovering from his words that had punched a big hole into my heart. I could not bear seeing her with anyone else. It had happened once, and I could not let it happen to me again.

"When they ask you to join them in some time politely decline the offer and tell Adira that you are busy but do not explain doing what," he said and looked at me for a response.

"Why can I not tell her what am I doing?" I asked him sulking.

"You cannot tell her what you are going to do while she has fun with her friends at the beach because A- You will be doing nothing apart from being with me in the room and watching TV and B- A man should always have an air of mystery around him, especially in front of the girl he loves. She will wonder what was so interesting for you that you chose to ignore her company over it. I decided to do as he suggested as he had way more experience with girls than I did. Moreover, I had not managed to move even an inch closer to Adira in the last three years. This man had helped me spend almost one day in her company- a dream had come true for me, and I decided to go with his advice for a few more days and see what happens.

Exactly seven minutes later there was a slight knock on the door. Rajbir got

up to open it, and I ran back into the bathroom to cover myself up.. I came out within moments dressed in a relaxed T-shirt and pajamas; to find Adira, Sakshi, and Angad standing in the living area taking to Rajbir. I could not take my eyes off Adira, dressed in a bright green top and denim shorts she looked very hot. She had washed all her office makeup, and her skin looked fresh. Her dark, deep eyes were on me as I walked in to join them. She broke eye contact with me when Angad placed her paws on her slim waist. I too looked away from her towards Angad who was showing off his teeth, inviting a punch on his face. Anger swelled me looking at him stake a claim to the girl I had always been madly in love with.

“Let’s go,” Sakshi said in her chirpy tone looking at me.

“I cannot” I replied feebly and looked at Rajbir for some support.

“What happened now? Why are you changing your plans again?” Adira asked me innocently and walked towards me. I was happy that she was out of Angad’s clutches, but as she approached me further looking straight into my eyes, I felt that she was better off where she was standing previously.

Looking at her, look at me made me nervous again. Her innocent eyes looked deep into my soul, and I could not make myself lie to her on her face. I closed my eyes and said “I have some work”. She looked at me with her eyebrows furrowed. “You have work which is more important than your friends ?”

Adira asked me. There it is- The word that every lover dreads; FRIENDS!

She was disappointed, Angad escorted the girls out of the room and standing at the window; I saw the three of them get into a taxi and leave for the beach. My heart became heavy, and the look on Adira’s face haunted me even in my sleep that night. Also in my dreams, was Angad pawing and flirting with Adira. I woke up early next morning and went out for a jog at six.

I played radio on my mobile, and unknown songs started playing. I plugged in my earphones and ran as hard and fast as I could to make the nightmares leave my memory.

I bumped into Adira upon my arrival at the hotel. She appeared grumpy and maybe even a little angry to have crashed into me.

“Hi” I managed to say between my hard breathing, and suddenly my whole body stiffened. Adira’s eyes moved over me; I felt as if she was checking me

out. I am an average looking guy with no major muscle build up anywhere in my body, and I became very conscious of the same. When our eyes met, she blushed a little; or maybe I thought that she blushed a little. She ignored my Hi and said, “I don't think that we can be friends. I do not like my friends to cancel plans like this.”

“Good” the word came out of my mouth abruptly, and Adira’s jaw dropped. I paused a little and thought what to say next. Adira kept looking at me. I do not want to be friends with you either because I want more than that.- I rehearsed the line in my head two times before saying it. “ I do not want to be friends with you either because ...” I could not finish my sentence thanks to the ever interfering Angad. He came up and hugged Adira. My reason for not wanting to be just friends with Adira kept hanging in the air between us.

Adira moved her attention to Angad who chose to ignore my presence entirely. I let them have their friendly conversations and walked back to my apartment thinking about all the different ways I could murder that spoilt, rich brat without getting caught.

Back at the apartment, I opened the main door rashly and was greeted by a puzzled Rajbir who was all set to get to the coffee shop for his morning coffee. “What happened?” he asked me astonished at the sudden change in my behavior. I walked in without a word and sat down on my bed with my head in my hands. I heard Rajbir’s footsteps follow me to the bedroom, he stood at the other end of my bed and waited for me to say something. “We have spoilt it all. I have spoilt it all. Adira is angry with me. She said she didn’t want to be friends with people like me who cancel plans. I think your advice is not working in this case. You might have a lot of experience in wooing girls, but my Adira is different. She looked at me so angrily. And then there is this Angad guy....” I blabbered for as long as I could and then got up from the bed to face Rajbir.

He was looking at me with a lot of empathy in his eyes. Suddenly, I felt so small. I had said so much to him when he was trying to help me out, genuinely; without asking for anything in return. It was my luck which was not in my favor. Rajbir did not say a word to me; he just sat down on his bed. I stood at the same spot for some time, waiting for him to react. When it did not happen, I picked up my clothes and locked myself in the bathroom for a shower; I was ashamed of my reactions. The hot water ran down from my

head to toe washing away my worries and draining them away. I stood under the hot water for more than five minutes and finally my mind was at ease. My mother always says - Whenever you have a problem or if things are not going your way and you want to react; hold your reactions and take a hot shower first. Imagine your worries and tensions as a big pile kept on your head. In the shower, as the water starts flowing from your head to your toes feel your problems melting and washing away. Slowly and steadily, no matter how big the problem is; it will melt completely and be washed away leaving you much calmer. Only with a free mind, one can reason.

I came out of the bathroom, dressed for work expecting to be alone in the apartment. To my surprise, Rajbir was still there. I looked at my watch; he had no time left for his morning coffee, he missed it for me. I looked down at my feet and said sorry to him. "You do not need to be sorry. I can only imagine what you are going through as you feel that you have screwed the last opportunity you had with this girl and that too because of me."

"No. It is not because of you. I know you were just trying to help" I told him embarrassed at my behavior.

"Sit down" Rajbir signaled towards my bed.

"We have fifteen minutes to reach office" I reminded him sitting down.

"Let me handle work. I know what I am doing" the authoritative Rajbir was back again.

"You think that she is angry with you because you said no to going out with her and her friends, however, I say that she is upset as she is trying hard to understand your reason for not going. Looking at her, I bet not many boys would have said no to a chance to be in her company. You might even be the first one to do so, and she has no clue how exactly does she feel about all this."

He becomes a psychologist in no time- I thought and rolled my eyes at him. "I am not unhappy because of her anger alone. I expected her to be a little annoyed; not as much as she is but a little. I am unhappy because I peeved her more during my interactions with her in the morning. And because Angad is now getting on my nerves." I fisted my left palm.

“What did you say to her?”

I narrated the small conversation that I had with Adira in the morning and Rajbir listened to me intently.

“This is not a big of a deal. You can make an amazing come back” he had a lot of confidence in me,

“Take her to a coffee may be or for some sightseeing; to a place where there is no one from work” he suggested flashing his Identification Card in front of the card reader at the door and the doors opened. We were almost half an hour late, thankfully Rajbir had called our trainer to say that we were stuck in the lift at the apartment and she believed him.

As expected, when we walked into the classroom the others had already started with the middle of the session. During the first break, everyone walked out to grab some coffee apart from Angad, me and Adira. *You need to talk to her-* I reminded myself and got up from my seat. Sometimes luck favors the most unlucky ones as well. It happened to me at that moment. Adira requested Angad to get her a packet of chips and the guy rushed to get the same for her, leaving me in her company.

I sat behind her and said “I am sorry” she turned around making her hair sweep across my face. I know the scene looks very beautiful in films, but with the first-hand experience, I can assure you that it is not a fun feeling being hit by a girls hair at that speed. “Ouch” I shrieked rubbing my eyes because her hair stands had managed to hit me at a delicate spot. As I said, luck was being too kind to me at that time. The tables turned instantly, and Adira started apologizing to me. “I am so very sorry” she kept on repeating trying to see what had happened to my eye. I shamelessly took advantage of her being sorry and decided to play a little. I rubbed my eyes a little more, and she placed her hand on mine to remove it. Her warm hands touched my face as she gently pulled my hand down and did not leave it. I had always dreamt of this moment but had never given much thought to how exactly would it feel. It was perfect. I froze for a moment. My hands went cold as ice, I could feel fluttering in my stomach, and my heart started to race. It was as if the whole world had stopped spinning at that moment as if the time froze to give us the time we needed. I fell in love with her all over again, this time more hopelessly than ever.

I removed my hand, and she blew gently on my eye. “Try and open your eye now” she requested, and I obliged her. “Is it any better?” she asked me worried. “A little,” I said and looked at her. She looked very sorry indeed and momentarily; I felt bad for making her feel so. “I am sorry,” I said to her sounding as sincere as I could, and she rewarded me with her signature smile. “About what?” she asked playfully. “About canceling the plans last evening but I really could not bail out of work,” I told her a white lie, and she believed it. “It is okay. I understand that work is very important for you,” she said.

“Very important” I repeated after her, “But not the most important” I added.

“What is the most important thing for you then?” she said adjusting her chair to face me. She rested her hands in her lap and played with her fingers.

“You need to know me more for me to discuss it with you,” I said don't know why.

“I gave you a chance yesterday to know me better, and I would have known you better too.” she sounded like a child.

“I know, and I missed it. I am sorry. But I can make it up to you. If you allow me to.” I was getting bolder every passing second and hoped that Angad did not barge into the room until I was done asking her out.

“And how is that?” she asked innocently.

“After work, we can walk down to Yarra River, together” I proposed.

“I will have to ask Sakshi” she was undecided.

I closed my eyes and gathered all my wit to say the next sentence. “I was hoping to walk down to the river with you, just me and you.”

“Ohhh okay” she agreed without any hesitation. I wanted to talk to her a little more but the good luck quota for the day was up for me. Before I could think of something nice, Angad hopped into the room with a packet of chips and a can of coke. Adira looked at him as if was relieved because of his timely or untimely entry. I got up and walked out of the room to give myself some space.

The training ended half an hour early that day as it was our trainer's son's birthday. All of us dispersed one after the other from the room after wishing her. I saw Adira leave the room with her friends.

You should have known that she was not going to come. Why do you always think very positively when it comes to her. If she had to come, she would have told you so. Did you not see how desperately she was waiting for Angad or someone else to go into the room when you asked her out, you could see that her answer was a no in the way she looked at you and still you had hope. She walked out of the training room without even looking at you even once- I was mumbling stuff.

I took another five minutes to come out of the building as I wanted all to go back without me. I needed some air; it felt as if it had been forever that I was alone with me.

“I thought you were going to take me to Yarra” Adira’s voice startled me as soon as I punched my Identification card on the machine and stepped out of the office. Dressed in a pair of black trousers and a white top she was standing leaning against a brick wall with her hands in her pockets. She oversized handbag slung over her right shoulder. She tilted her head a little and gave me a warm smile. Looking at her standing there, I grinned like a fool. *She has agreed to give you a chance you fool! Cheer up!!* “Sure,” I said trying to act casual, and we walked side by side towards Yarra River.

It was time for almost everyone to head back home in CBD and Adira and I became a part of the ever-swelling crowd as soon as we stepped out on the road. As we walked towards our destination, which was hardly fifteen minutes walk from work; slowly and gradually, the crowd around us started thinning and finally vanished. We reached the bridge that connected the city from one side of the river to the other. There were mostly tourists around, walking, laughing, clicking pictures and having a good time. Within fifteen minutes we escaped the madness of the busy world and entered a relaxed place where one could talk their heart out. We walked together in silence until Adira saw a modern piece of artifact installed next to the bridge. “Here, take my picture,” she said handing her her phone to me and dashed off to pose. The phone was locked. “What is its password?” I asked her loudly. “It is my birthday,” she said and before she could add anything “Fourteenth December” slipped out of my mouth. I bit my tongue. I did not want to

appear as a stalker. She didn't say anything just looked at me and smiled. I clicked a few of her pictures, and we decided to stand at the bridge.

After the last goof up I was too scared to restart the conversation. So, I observed the beautiful scene in front of us. Yarra looked so calm and peaceful at that hour. The water in it was probably not the cleanest that I had seen, but it moved in a beautiful rhythm. The water sparkled in the warmth of the sun. Trees on the other side swayed with soft blowing breeze, A fading rainbow was visible at a distance, and sweet sounds of twittering birds filled the space between us. People were rowing in the river. We stood against the thick walls. Adira placed her hand on the wall, and her beautiful bracelet shone like many diamonds. After what felt like hours Adira finally broke the silence, "You remember my birthday?" she asked.

I wondered how to answer it. Rajbir had told me in the morning that I should tell Adira that I was interested in being friends with her, ever since I had seen her. This was an opportunity, and I wanted to make the most of it. I took a moment and then turned towards her. She wanted me to say something to her, tell her what she was wanted to know. Her big brown eyes lined beautifully with an eyeliner inclined slightly. Her face looked the most beautiful in the light of the dusk. Looking at her, I realized how some women are beautiful in a way that they can be only described through poems, not sentences; just verses. I told myself- *Ronnie, you might not get another chance, there will be no next time. It is either now or never.*

I cast my eyes down and then raised them up again to meet hers. Sometimes a moment changes everything for you; it was that kind of moment for me. I had learned to close my eyes to go to my happy place so that I found enough courage to talk o Adira. Looking into her eyes at that moment, I realized that I was doing it all wrong. I need not close my eyes to find my happy place; her eyes were my happy place. Her eyes looking at me gave me enough courage to conquer the world for her.

"Do you like your bracelet?" I asked her

"I asked you something first. You need to reply only then I will tell you whatever you want to know," she argued like a child.

"Tell me whether you like it or not and I will tell you why I remember your

birthday,” I told her.

She looked away and made a funny face. Giggling she said, “Yes, I love it. It has everything that I love which is why I love it” and looked back at me. “Now you tell me.”

“I remember it because I love this bracelet too” I replied and she furrowed her eyebrows.

“As in?”

I recited the lines that I once wrote for her but could not own up to-
"Looking at you, I think I can write a Love Story."

“I bought it for you” I added and looked straight into her eyes. She blushed, her cheeks were the darkest of pink I had ever seen the color. “It was you? But why did you not say it that day? Nitin lied?” She could hardly believe it.

“Yes, it was me. I was too shy to tell you that.. that” words were not my best friend.

“What?” she was teasing me, and I knew it. Girls know exactly what a guy wants to say at times, but they act innocent. I knew it and happily played along.

“That I want to be more than just friends with you.,” I said the words which had kept me awake at nights for years. I held my breath and waited for her response.

She was not angry at me, but she was not very thrilled at my confession either. I had anticipated anger or happiness- her indifference was beyond my understanding. “You are a good guy Raunak. I have known you for so long.” She said and looked at the bracelet. “Love destroyed me. It took me months to rebuild myself. There was this man that my parents chose for me. I fell in love with him, and he threw me out of his life like garbage as I was not good enough for him. Love gives no happiness to anyone. I am not sure whether I want to let anyone enter that corner of my heart ever again.” her voice was low and sad, melancholy spread across her face.

She told me something that I had always known. I didn’t tell her that I couldn’t, she would have thought of me like a madman who had no other

work but to follow her everywhere she went. I had loved her ever since. I knew that she was probably not ready then but I was willing to wait. What I had begun in Melbourne, I had to finish. I could not turn back after putting in so much love. My love might come back to me empty handed, but I had to give it a chance.

"Adira just because of something which happened in the past, do not stop believing in love, do not stop looking for love, do not stop loving."

"I am not asking for your love here." My sentence took her by surprise. "All I am asking for is a chance to see if we can be what I want us to be," she said nothing just nodded a little, and I took it as yes. We walked back next to each other like we had arrived yet something had wholly changed between us. Our hands brushed against each other very often. We were both lost in our thoughts.

It was not a very long walk, and we were back to our hotel in no time. We had hardly spoken all through our way back. I let her walk out of the lift ahead me and saw her walk towards her apartment. She walked slowly as if was in some deep thought, without a word to me, she parted ways. As I placed my card key on the reader, I turned towards her to get a last glimpse of her for the evening. She opened the white door, walked in and turned around to close it with her eyes cast down. Finally, as she was closing the door, she lifted her eyes and our eyes met for a split second. Gloom had not left her face. My heart skipped a beat looking at her go away, Anticipation and love filled my thoughts, and it dawned on to me how much I wanted to be with her. I realized that losing her to someone else would mean losing myself into a space too dark to imagine- I wanted anything but that.

I walked straight into the washroom noting that Rajbir was not in the apartment, which was very unlike him. After freshening up and changing into a more relaxed attire, I walked into the sitting area and floppily threw myself on the couch. Suddenly, there was a knock on the door, it was not Rajbir at the door but Adira. She had changed into non-work clothes too - a black Adidas lower and a gray T-shirt. Her hair was braided in a loose braid, and she looked like a young girl. "I hope you are not busy," she said as soon as I opened the door for her. "No, not at all" I replied looking at her. She was still in her thoughts. I wondered what made her knock my door.

She walked in without giving me a chance to invite her to the apartment. "Your apartment has a better view," she remarked sitting on the couch. "Yes, thank you," I told her looking at the same Yarra river which witnesses our discussion earlier and closed the door behind me. "Do you want something?" I asked my beautiful guest. She signaled a no with her hands and kept on staring out of the window.

'Without moving her eyes away from the scene outside the window , she slouched back into the soft couch.

"I am going through a bad phase with my family. My parents are in the middle of a divorce, and I do not wish to talk to either of them. No one knows, not even Tamanna. Do not spread it." She confined in me.

It took some time for the information to sink in me. I looked at her face, and I saw a different, more emotional Adira than the one that I always knew. I could tell that she missed her parents, she lost her family, but she was angry as well as hurt which is why she dare not admit it. I decided to turn the conversation from parents to us. Also, I felt high to have managed to make a space in her life so important that she was telling me things that she did not discuss with anyone else, not even Tamanna. "No I won't" I mumbled softly. I felt that there was way too much tension in the room.

"So, what kind of a guy can make you fall in love again?" I asked her abruptly to change the topic and then wondered where did the guts to ask such a dreaded question come to me? I was scared that she would get angry and maybe even leave the room at once, but thankfully she did neither. In fact, she started giggling covering her mouth with her hands. Looking at her like that, I felt a sense of calmness caress my worried mind.

“Tell me,” I asked once again.

“I do not know. I don't think that after falling in love once and seeing my parent's marriage fall apart in front of my eyes; I would dare to be in love again. I guess love dies with time; it is an overrated emotion. Once it leaves your side, you are left alone. It has happened to me in the past I am not ready for it again. Men cannot love a single woman all their lives. But I am still in love with the idea of love” she told me.

“ Sometimes I wonder if you and I are the same person. We are a little broken, quite messed up and in love with the idea of love. Love dies, unless you work on it. Do you know what kind of a girl I can love all my life?” My mind was running on an overdose of love, and my tongue was the most daring that I had ever imagined it to be.

“Tell me” she tilted her head like she always did and smiled.

“I will love and be in love forever with a very intelligent woman,” I told her.

“Intelligent? Why? You want her to solve mathematical problems for you?”
she is witty.

“I do not care whether she is bookish kind of intelligent or not. In fact, I would not care even if she would not have finished her college. I want a woman with whom I can have real, intelligent and meaningful conversations with, all night long. The conversations that make me go deep into them, such conversations should keep me up all night and give me goosebumps even in her absence. I want to think for hours about her. I have to be in love with her mind to be in love with her all my life.” I was all candid. As soon as she looked into my eyes again, into my soul, I felt my shyness returning. I stopped talking, and she knew that it was her turn to open up.

“You are so clear about what you want. I honestly do not know what I would be looking for if at all one day I decide to be with someone. But I do know that if that one day comes, it will come only because of love. Love that can make me breathless and weak. Love that will allow me to let the other person in my soul. A place which is so within me that I would change forever at his entrance.” her words were sincere and so were her thoughts. I knew the most beautiful girl with the most beautiful mind was sitting right in front of me. I could move the mountains for her if, she would love me back. I wondered

what exactly was going through her mind. At that moment I knew that we were a little more than friends and a little less than lovers already! I looked at her to understand her more, but her face was giving nothing away, and neither were those dark, deep eyes.

Our gaze broke by the sound of laughter outside the door. Rajbir and Prateek were standing there. "I should go now," Adira said. "Are you busy tomorrow?" I asked her breathlessly. It was Saturday the next day, and I wanted to take her somewhere. "I do not have any plans yet," she said and then bend down to write her phone number on the notebook lying on the table between us. "Call me if you want to hang out together," she said and left me and my thoughts in the middle.

I quickly made a note of her number on my phone and tore the paper off the notebook. Now when I recall what I did with it, I can tell you that it was a very creepy move- I folded it, sniffed it like a dog and kept it safely in my pocket as a souvenir. I checked her number on Whatsapp, there was no profile picture or status. Or probably there was one, but I was not able to view it as then one could manage the settings in the way to ward off strangers, stalkers of one-sided lovers.

Rajbir walked in, and I discussed everything with him, not in detail though. "You do manage to talk to her more freely nowadays. That is good. It is great progress from the time we first met." He patted my shoulders.

"I want to take her out somewhere. Where shall I take her?" I invited him to give some inputs.

"You know her much better than I do. Think of a place that as per you will make her feel special, will touch her heart and also make her realize how much you think of her," he said and went in for a shower.

I picked up my laptop and connected it to the apartment's wifi to see what were my options. Fifteen minutes later the bathroom door opened and I saw a giant cloud of steam come out of it. "By the way, I have had dinner you can either order from room service or go out for dinner somewhere outside. We are in a new city; you should go out more often. " Rajbir suggested as he stepped out of the washroom. "I will be eating here as I am browsing the internet for some places to take Adira to," I told him without taking my eyes off my laptop's screen. I had nearly zero the most romantic thing to do in Melbourne- Hot Air Balloon ride over Melbourne City and Breakfast for two.

Looking at the pictures, I could say that it was just out of a Bollywood movie. Rajbir switched on the T.V and sat at the other end of the couch. I decided to

take an expert opinion before asking Adira to be ready early the next morning. So, I turned my laptop in front of Rajbir and asked him for his thoughts on it. He moved his concentration from one L.E.D to the other and looked at it very seriously.

“Looks very romantic,” he remarked a couple of seconds later, and I felt as if I was two inches taller. I find Rajbir to be a tough critic to please and having done so; I felt a sense of pride in my discovery. But as I said- Rajbir is a strict critic to please. He proved the same yet again by giving me another piece of Gyaan and making me rethink the entire plan.

“First impression is the last impression, and it is a fact for as far as I know. But the subsequent impressions should also be well thought upon. When you took her for a walk along Yarra this evening, it was all romantic and stuff” he said, and I could not help but ask him in surprise, “How do you know that we went to Yarra?”

“I had food in the restaurant opposite the bridge where the two of you stood with your heads joined together, talking romantically,” he remarked and showed the complete set of his teeth. His mischievous grin was annoying. However, I was relieved to know that it was a mere accident that Rajbir knew about our walk., Had that not been the case, I would be shit scared to even talk to a man who was most definitely a spy.

He did not wait for me to react to his declaration and began his preaching, “After the first impression, one should not wait forever. I was thinking of suggesting you ask her out again soon when I was coming back. But I must say that you deserve a pat on your back for this one. You did quite a good job in asking her out again, soon.” It was a good feeling to exceed Rajbir’s expectations.

“But..” Here we go again- I thought “Anyone can take her to the hot air balloon. The internet is full of ads of companies that help you with it. The ride is meant for tourists” I bowed my head down and asked him what had he done had he been in my shoes. Without meeting his eyes.

“Trust me, I would have never been in your shoes.” he said irritating me “But I can suggest you think of what she needs the most right now before you make a plan. Plan your date so that she feels loved and cared for, she needs to

feel that her happiness is the most important for you. If you think she needs time, take her to a place which can give you guys time together. If you feel that she needs adventure then, by all means, take her to the Balloon thing or even better take her for some hiking at Dandenong Ranges. But think of her first and then make a plan” he busied himself in flipping channels again and I shelved my plans to message Adira for the time being. I needed to think first, but before thinking, I needed to eat something and silence my loudly rumbling stomach. I ordered a large pizza and coke to fuel my tummy as well as my thinking brain.

Finally, after two hours of a hunt for places, I made a phone call to set things up. I planned the next day with two different locations in my mind and dropped a message to Adira- Would you want to come with me to a friend's house?- I did not have to wait long. She replied positively in no time. Seven thirty tomorrow? - I sent her the second message. “Okay” was her reply. I checked her number on my Whatsapp contact list again. Her picture was visible, and so was her status which meant that she had saved my number post our chat. I looked at her profile picture which included Sakshi and Angad. The image was taken outside our office in Gurgaon. I took a screenshot of the image and cropped her friends from her either side in the pic to save it. She had a sad status message, a quote by Oscar Wild:

Death must be so beautiful, To lie in the soft brown earth, with the grasses waving above one's heads and listen to silence. To have no yesterdays and no tomorrow. To forget time, to forgive life, to be at peace.

The next day, I woke up before my alarm had the opportunity to disturb my sleep. In fact, I had hardly slept all night the previous night, partly in anticipation of what the next day was to bring for us and partly due to the sad status message which I read next to Adira's number on Whatsapp just before sleeping. I hoped she was not depressed. The kind of feelings and thoughts a child gets around their parents' divorce must be heartbreaking; depression is unavoidable in many cases for sure. I was determined to bring her out of the sad state that she as in, life has so much to offer. A depressed person is unable to see the beauty of life.

I dressed in a pair light blue denim and a white T-shirt as I wanted to keep my style simple and elegant. The day had to be all about Adira, and I was in no mood to be the center of attraction, not that I could be one when I was being accompanied by the world's most beautiful girl. My cousin who lives in America had brought a Dolce and Gabbana perfume for me when she last visited India. It had been lying unused in the house ever since as I hardly got any opportunity to wear it. Finally, I gave it a chance to come out of my closet when I packed it with me for the trip. I picked up the delicate glass bottle with a Maroon cap very carefully from the shelf where I had placed it last night. The One- was printed under D&G and I assumed that it was the name of the fragrance. I sprayed some perfume in front of me and then walked through it like they tell you to do on lifestyle shows. I smelled myself; there was hardly any smell. So, I decided to wear it my way. I sprayed the perfume all over me, as generously as possible and stepped out of the bathroom. The early riser, Rajbir stood outside waiting for me to vacate the place.

I heard him mumble and complaint as soon as he stepped in but I was in no mood to entertain him and his smart mouth at the bringing of a day which promised to bring so much to me. "Did you manage to break the perfume bottle or what? Warn Adira as she might faint due to the Perfume rain that happened on you..." Ignoring him, I picked up my wallet, phone and watch and walked out of the apartment.

I called Adira's mobile number once I was safely out of the apartment and could no longer hear my manager's manager howling and screaming like a baby. She did not answer, and the call eventually went on to voice mail. She had not set up a voice message, and I decided to knock on the door rather than leave a message on a machine which she might never listen to. I walked towards her room and then froze midway. There she stood, right behind the elevators; dressed in a red salwar suit. She looked like a dream too good to be true. Her long silky hair was not tied back for a change, her eyes were beautifully lined with dark streaks of Kajal, and she had a sparkly golden bindi on her forehead. She turned around and raised her eyebrows at my sight; maybe it was my open mouth that led to such a strange reaction from her. "You said that we are also going to your friend's house and I assumed that some elders might be there too. Is this not okay? Shall I go and get changed?" she asked me looking quite confused and her face flushed. "No.. Not at all. You look...fine... I mean great... I am not very good at all this you know" I could not think of any appropriate words. She furrowed her eyebrows like she always does and formed a pout with her full lips. "Are you sure?" she asked me again. "Yes. I am. You look so Beautiful" there it was, the word finally managed to come out of my mouth. She tilted her head a little and gave me a shy smile. I pressed the buttons on the elevator, and within a flash of a second, it was on our floor and so were a lot of other people to ensure that under no circumstances I got an opportunity to be with Adira alone in the elevator.

Once inside, I kept looking for ways to look into Adira's direction as the lift descended, the small elevator was packed with a group of men dressed in casual clothes, they talked in high pitched voices. Adira squeezed herself into a corner and sadly I was forced to squeeze myself in the other. She kept fiddling with her phone, her two golden bangles; which she wore together in her right hand clinked as she tried to keep her hair away from her face. I leaned against the elevator walls and took my time to admire her beauty.

As soon as the doors of the elevator opened, the group of men hurriedly walked out. Adira moved her eyes from her phone to me. I gave her way to walk out, and she followed her like a gentleman. We stepped out on the road, and she asked me, "So where are we headed?"

"It is a surprise," I told her smiling. "It better be a good one," she told me like a school teacher and sat in a cool blue Uber which was waiting for us. Once inside she was the first one to start talking for a change, "I do not go out with guys just like that Raunak." She said out of nowhere, and I did not know how to respond to it. "I know. But you know me from the last many years" I said when no other appropriate response else came to my mind.

"Yes, I do. Which is why I trust you so much." She told me, and I vowed to myself to never break her trust. I promised Adira to be there for her, always. We were headed to Shirdi Mandir at a place called Camberwell. It was going to be a long journey, so I started chit chatting with the Uber driver while Adira made a phone call to someone.

Once her call ended, she told me that she was talking to Tamanna. "You remember her don't you?" she asked me. "Of course I do. She will be my sister in law soon" I reminded her. "Oh yes! I completely forgot about that." Adira smiled a mysterious smile, and I wondered what that was about. "Why are you smiling like this?" I asked her after a few moments. "Like what?" she looked back at me smiling the same way. She knows what you are talking about; she is teasing you- my mind informed me at a lifting speed.

"Like this," I told her pointing towards her smile, and she giggled loudly. "Okay. I will tell you, but you will have to promise me that you will not get angry" she stretched out her left hand, and I held it, softly. Her hands felt perfect in mine as if they were meant to be in my hands forever. I admired the bracelet on her left wrist and then raising my eyes said, "I can never get angry with you. You should know this by now" Listening to those words she laughed a bit louder and then added, "No, not at me. Promise that you will not be angry at Piyush."

"Piyush! What has he done? or said?" Piyush never ceased to surprise me; my tone must have told Adira that I would be not surprised listening to whatever she had to say to me about my cousin. I hoped that he had, however, not shared any of the embarrassing tales of my childhood with

either Adira or Tamanna. Cousins are your first friends; we are closest to them because they know all our dirty secrets and can put us in shame anywhere and everywhere if they want to.

She studied my face for a few seconds before replying. “So, a few months after Piyush and Tamanna started going around, Piyush told Tamanna that you had a crush on me.” The backstabber- Piyush’s name was now number one on my hit list.

“Really!” I could not help but say and scratched my chin trying to formulate a plan to come back at him.

“You are not angry, are you?” Adira brought me back from my evil thoughts with her words.

“No not angry,” I told her honestly, I was way beyond angry with Piyush. Suddenly, I felt Adira take her hand out of my grip.

“So did you have a crush on me then?” she asked me softly looking down at her lap and knotting her fingers together.

“Then? Yes, I did” I told her the truth and saw her turn pink. She was getting affected by my confession, and I felt butterflies in my stomach. “Not anymore right?” she asked me an incomplete question, and I chose to answer it truthfully as well. “No, I do not have a crush on you anymore” because I did not any longer have a crush on her. My innocent crush on her had graduated into sincere love, admiration and respect. I wanted to take care of her and be with her all my life.

She blinked her eyes a few times looking at me. I saw her long eyelashes fan her cheeks gently and had an urge to kiss her lovely eyes.

“You have reached your destination” the Uber driver declared, and my fantasy along with our conversation died a premature death.

Our Destination- Sai Temple

Adira stepped out of the car, and I followed her. She read the signboard and immediately placed her dupatta on her head. We entered the red double story building it had huge glass windows everywhere. From the outside, it looked like a local cooperation building in India but as they say, Looks can be deceptive, and so they were. I was quite amazed at the way it was built and maintained when we finally stepped inside a few minutes later.

We reached there at eight forty-five, and the mandir opened for devotees at Nine in the morning. “We have fifteen minutes; we can take a walk in the garden” Adira suggested. We walked on the green patch around the building. There was a small but very well kept garden outside the Mandir; it had many colorful flowers as well as a few massive trees growing in it. There were many idols, beautifully decorated with clothes and flowers in the garden. After a walk, we sat for a few minutes at the main door and waited for the doors to be opened for devotees. Sharp at nine, the doors opened, a Pujari was reciting beautiful hymns as we walked in along with many others who had gathered outside to attend the Arti. All of us faced a large and perfectly sculpted marble statue of Sai Baba, which was at the other end of the room. It was adorned with jewels and a crown. The place smelled divine with many incense sticks burning in all corners. In a few minutes as the hall nearly packed with devotees, the Arti began, and we were all transported to a world which was way more beautiful than the ones we lived in. Everyone joined hands, and the place turned from beautiful to magical, from glorious to gloriously divine.

We took our Prasad at the end of the Arti and walked out. “Thanks for bringing me here,” Adira said, and I asked her not to bother thanking me as I did this for myself as much as for her. “I go to the temple once every week, and I know that you do too,” I told her, and she rewarded me with an enchanting smile. “Now what? Are we not going to your friend’s house?” She asked me impatiently. “We, of course, are,” I told her to wait at the temple door while I looked for my friend’s car. He had reached fifteen minutes ago and was parked somewhere nearby. I walked a little towards the left from the door and called Sahil, my friend from school. He picked up the call after two rings, and he was at the main gate with the car in three minutes precisely.

We hugged each other like a lost brothers, and I called Adira for an introduction. “This is Adira,” I told Sahil beaming, and we set off to his home in his red Mercedes Z class, which was not very far off.

Sahil had first come to Australia after completing class twelfth, that was the last time we had met in person. The only child of his wealthy parents, he went to the country of kangaroos and Holden Cars to complete his graduation. But fate turned against the family when he lost his father. He never went back to India. Instead, his mother moved to Australia; permanently to live with her only son. We were also neighbors, and everyone in the neighborhood knew what happened in the family which leads to his father’s sudden death. The previous night when I spoke to him over the phone, I told him that I needed his help with Adira and listening to the entire story he agreed to help me. As much as possible.

I bowed down to touch his mother's feet upon entrance and Adira folded her hands to greet her. All of us sat on the plush couches in the living room as their help Asha, whom they had brought with them from India; served us water. Sahil's house can be best described as luxury. A fireplace, a very large L.E.D. T.V, and a fantastic sound system were all set up in front of us along with another luxurious couch, an antique center table and a single grand chair in the corner. He did not take long to check if we wanted a tour of his splendid house, and we nodded in unison. Upon a tour, I concluded that he indeed was a wealthy man. There were more than three seating places with big couches and TVs in them; a separate media room was built for entertainment on the ground floor. The car garage had two cars an Audi and a Mercedes; the one in which we had arrived. The first floor had four well designed and decorated bedrooms and not to forget; the house had a grand kitchen and dinning area on the ground floor.

"Aunty you have an amazing house here" Adira complimented as we sat down at the dinning table for a late breakfast. I was happy to smell Aloo Paratha after ages. Asha served food to all of us around the magnificently sizeable dining table, and Aunty joined us for a light-hearted conversation. After having breakfast, Aunty retired to her bedroom room upstairs for some rest and Sahil, Adira and I went into the Media room to explore Sahil's Gaming consoles.

"Who is this?" Adira pointed towards a photograph of Sahil's dad in the room.

"That is my father... was my father" Sahil corrected himself.

"Oh, I am so sorry I did not know" Adira was apologetic and ease at was only after Sahil gave her a half-hearted smile suggesting that she had not hurt him with her innocent mistake.

"He died three years ago," he said taking his father's picture from Adira's hand placing it back on the shelf from where she had picked it up. Both, Adira and I stood at our places looking at Sahil talk about his father, with nothing but sadness in our eyes and heart. "It was a suicide actually, " he said and inhaled deeply. I walked towards him and kept my hand on his shoulders as a gesture of my support. "It could have been prevented you know," he said looking at me and then in Adira's direction. She stood alone in the corner of

the room unable to comprehend why was he saying what he was saying. They had just met, and he need not open his heart to her. But I knew that he had to, she should listen to what he had to say.

“My father wanted a divorce as he had fallen out of love with my mother. He loved another woman who made her happy. I was too young to understand any of it and stopped talking to the man who had hurt my mother, the woman who has no flaws in my eyes. I did not and still cannot understand how and why a man can fall out of love with a woman who gave him all those years of her life and always thought of him before her self. My mother and father fought for days and I assume so did the other woman who was in love with him. I was so angry that I stopped answering his phone calls and once even told him that he was the worst father in the world, which he was not. I am ashamed of my words now.” he wiped his tears which had found their way down his earlier dry cheeks. “Daddy could not take the stress, the fights, and the anger from his child anymore. He hung himself from the ceiling fan. I blamed myself for his actions for days. If you ask me today, I would rather have him alive living happily with that other woman than dead and gone. He left me a message that night on my voice mail. I still cannot forget it. He told me that sometimes even parents do things which are not right, they make mistakes, they act silly, they fall out of love, they fight. But this doesn't mean that they are bad individuals. This just means that they are humans, and we should forgive humans, for no human can be perfect, ever.”

Adira had her hand on her mouth; tears were trickling down her cheeks one after the other. She looked horrified. I patted Sahil, and he excused himself leaving Adira and me alone. I walked up to her and tried to wipe her tears. “Do not touch me. You told him, did you not!” she yelled at me and took me by surprise with her anger. “I had to. I do not want you to regret many years later as he does now” I tried reasoning her and handed her a tissue box. She snatched it violently from my hand and bowed her head down. Her hair fell all over her face and shoulders. “Adira,” I said placing a hand on her shoulder. “I said do not touch me” she looked up crying, her face was red and blotched. I could not see her like that and turned my eyes away from her. “I am sorry,” I said and walked out of the room.

Sahil and I waited in the kitchen for Adira to appear out of the Media room for many moments, which felt like years. Finally, she came out looking

calmer, her eyes were still bloodshot and her nose was runny. I wanted to hug the scared girl who stood before us and tell her that all will be alright she just needs to accept the things as they are, but that did not feel like the right time to do so. I waited for her to say something. "I need some water," she said looking at Sahil, and he jumped to get it for her. She is just angry with me not with him, well that was good news- I wondered what I could do to change the situation.

Sahil handed her a glass of water which she drank painfully slowly, without uttering a single word. She placed the glass on the kitchen island and spoke again, to Sahil of course. My name was probably stricken off from the list of people she trusted. I felt my heart shatter; I heard a clean sound and felt my heart break into thousands of pieces. Adira asked Sahil if she could talk to his mother for a while. Sahil took her upstairs and my wait to be able to speak with her continued.

Almost one hour later, the two ladies descended downstairs. Adira looked much better, and I was relieved. "Have lunch with us" Auntie insisted. "We have some plans auntie, but we shall come over again before we go back to India if we get time" Adira lied to Sahil's mother and walked out of the main door. I followed her despite being not spokento. She was angry, and I had to wait until her anger subsided and sense prevailed into her.

I quickly booked an Uber which arrived a minute later, and we were on our way back to our hotel after a very emotionally stressful outing. Things were not going as per my plan, but I could care the least about it. It was Adira that I was worried about, I knew that she was not very well emotionally and I feared that I had made it worse for her by taking her to Sahil's house.

The first five minutes of our journey were the longest and the quietest. After five minutes, Adira looked at me and said the most unexpected words, "I am sorry. You were right; I needed to talk to someone like Sahil and his mother. Thank you for taking me to Sahil's house" I gaped at her with my mouth wide open. Does she mean it? I decided to give her some time to react before I concluded.

She began talking after a pause "Ever since I can remember, I have always seen my parents fight over things, big, small even imaginative at times. In fact, I have hardly ever seen them normally talking to each other. Taunting each other in front of friends, relatives, drinking and abusing each other at parties and outings was a norm. It was as clear as a crystal that they were not compatible with each other. They managed to live together, be with each other for so many years of their lives. Mostly, for my sake and for the reason that our society has prejudices against divorced people. Finally, they have thought of deciding for themselves. They have decided to do what they should have done long ago, and instead of being there for them and supporting them, I stopped talking to them. Maybe I wanted to punish them

for ruining my idea of a perfect family forever, despite knowing deep down that this was the best thing that they were doing for themselves. We were never a perfect family. We could never be. I know that you say that no family is perfect, we all have problems right? But the difference with my family was- families have problems in them, we had problems and somewhere in them was a family. I was so mean” she started sobbing again with her face in her hands. I tucked her loose hair behind her ears, and she looked up at me. “I would rather have them alive and separated, living happily and enjoying their lives than to see them harm themselves.” I fished out a white hanker chief from my pocket.

I spoke nothing to her; my words were not needed. All we needed was silence to understand each other and ourselves. At the next traffic signal, I felt her head rest on my shoulder. I did not turn to look whether she was awake or asleep. I did not try to check if she wanted to talk or remain quite. I let the moment be; I let silence be.

Last Week In Melbourne

The last week at work at the Melbourne office flew by attending meetings, calls, understanding the expectations of the clients and working in the future if the project. Everyone was buried till neck at work, and so was I. Our colleagues at the Melbourne office had planned a road trip for us on Friday as a farewell parting gift for us. The place where we were headed to was six hours drive from Melbourne city and was called The Great Ocean Road.

Despite having almost no time for our selves, Adira and I continued our Whatsapp and Facebook Messenger conversations. Yes, I was finally her friend on Facebook. I made a fresh account and gathered all my courage and send her a friend request which she gladly accepted. She had also made peace with the status of her parent's relationship and was glad to learn that their love for her had not been impacted by her recent behavior. I saw her anger, as well as disappointment in her parents, decrease and she was more lively than before.

It was Thursday, Angad, Adira and I got free from work around the same time while Rajbir, Prateek, and Sakshi still had lots to do in the next few hours. The trio stood at the main gate talking when joined them I heard Angad ask Adira if she wanted to grab a cup of coffee before heading towards the hotel, "Would you like to join us?" Adira extended her invite. I realized that her innocent act had pissed off the dear male friend of hers, who looked anything but happy at her actions. Rajbir's words echoed in my head - *You are not a part of her friend circle so do not be in it until the status of your relationship is confirmed.* I had not managed to become the boyfriend yet, and I wondered what Rajbir would say if I accepted the invite. I looked at Adira, and the guy who was sitting next to her and ogling at her as if she was a cake, the sight of him helped me make a decision. I was going to make an exception to Rajbir's rule, just this one time. *She has not asked you to accompany her to her "Friends."* There was just one other guy, and from the look on his face, I could tell that he was trying hard to graduate to the level.

"Of course I will," I said giving her my best smile. I saw Angad frown but could care the least about him.

We walked down to the nearest Starbucks which had a long queue in front of it. It was crowded as if the cafe was selling their signature coffees for free.

“What will you have?” Angad asked looking at Adira as soon as we entered. “I am not sure, surprise me,” Adira told him with a cheerful expression. I would be lying if I said to you that I was at ease with the level of friendship they shared- The frequent high fives, the cuddly hugging, smiles, and laughter at jokes which I did not comprehend- all made me quite uncomfortable and insecure. Will Rajbir’s fundas work? I wondered looking at Angad who looked quite smitten by Adira, nearly as smitten as I was, maybe more. But who could blame him, Adira is one of a kind, and it is easy to fall in love with a girl as perfect as her?

Angad left us with instructions.-Look for some seating space in the crowded place. As soon as he turned his back on us to queue up in front of the counter, Adira and I got involved in a small chit-chat session. I complimented her with the most sincere smile on my face, on her looks and she blushed and returned the compliment; quite unexpectedly. “You look quite good yourself today” I was not prepared for her generosity, and I felt all my blood rush to my face. My hands were cold as ice while my cheeks burnt like the back of a frying pan. I can only imagine how I must have looked, my complexion unlike other people’s does not turn into soft shades of pink or red whenever I am embarrassed. It instead turns into the color of beetroot to increase my embarrassment further. Receiving compliments on the way I looked was a rare occurrence for me and to get one from the girl I was head over heels in love with was like a dream, a dream which did not last for long as Angad bought the order while we were still in the I-Blush-You-Giggle mode.

“Are there no seats?” Angad asked surprised, and I looked at him with cold eyes. The cafe was packed with double the number of people it was designed for. I knew that Adira and I had not looked for a place while he was away but trust me, even if we would have; we would have found none “There are way too many people. I do not think we can sit here.” I told him blankly.

“Let us take our coffees and walk as we sip them” Adira suggested the only way out, and I agreed, Angad had no choice but to follow us out of the cafe. He had bought fancy long cold coffee topped with two scoops of ice creams and chocolate sauce for Adira and himself and a small cup of weak coffee for me. He wanted me to feel unwanted, but I was too happy in Adira’s warm company to care about their iced cold coffees. She spoke to me while we walked towards the Melbourne City Museum. “How are things at work for

you?” I asked her after she was done narrating all that she and Tamanna spoke about the previous night. She rolled her eyes in boredom. “The same,” she said and looked at me as if trying to understand something. “What is it?” I questioned. “Nothing” came the same response. I was trying to understand the change in the way she looked at me; it had been a few days since I first noticed it. I had asked her a few times what was it that was bothering her. She chose not to give me any other response but a plain old- Nothing. Sometimes I wondered if she too had fallen in love with me, maybe she had; perhaps she hadn’t. It was something only she could tell. But I was convinced that it did not see only love what I saw in her eyes those days when I looked deep into them. It was more than that; it was like a cocktail of many emotions in her eyes which was driving me mad. I was not an expert at reading faces or eyes, but I could tell that hers had sorrow, pain, a bit of love, anticipation, many questions, some fear and even wonder in them.

We continued our small talk while Angad walked next to Adira maintaining his silence, brooding over something. “I would like to pay for my coffee,” I told him as soon as we reached the apartment. “Don’t bother?” he said studying me. “I want to” I insisted. Adira excused us and walked in as she got a call from her mother, leaving me in Angad’s company until he told me what I owed him. “I think she is not your type and you should step back,” he said taking the conversation into a different zone. “That is a hefty cost for the bland, lukewarm coffee which I had. I would rather pay you back in dollars than accept your request” I told him passively.

“And your jokes are as lame as your attempts to woo Adira” Angad snapped back. “Do not think of fooling me. I know what you have been trying to do for days. I can see what you feel for her, but trust me she has no feelings for you or anyone for that matter, at this moment. She is a good friend of mine, I have known her for months now, and I can tell you that she is not very comfortable with you trying to be all over her, so back off” there was a severe warning in his low tone.

“Really!” I laughed at him. “I know her for far more years and months than you do. She is a grown-up girl who can talk her mind. If she has a problem with me or in being with me, she is very well capable of telling that to me on her own. You need not be her voice” I growled at him, and before the unnecessary argument heated further, I leaped towards the stairs. There is no

point wasting your time in a conversation with an asshole like him- I told myself as I reached the apartment. My head was hurting as if it was going to burst with all the anger and rage in me I always knew that Angad was trouble.

I noticed that Rajbir was not back from work till then. I knew that he was putting in extra hours at work that evening as all the work had to be completed by the end of the day so that could go to The Great Ocean Road the next morning. I took out a bottle of cold water and gulped half of it down my throat. “Phewwww” I had never been in a situation like this ever before, fighting for a girl with a man who was undoubtedly closer to her than I had managed to be. He was her friend, and I knew that she placed her friends very important in her life. If he asks her to stay away from me then who knows, she might just stop talking to me. What if he was not bluffing but stating the truth? What if Adira wants to be away from me? Maybe this is what the look in her eyes is all about. She has been hinting that I should back off, all she wants is friendship and nothing more. It is not love but hesitance that I see in her eyes as she is unable to tell me what she wants and break my heart. I should talk to Rajbir, no I should speak with Adira.

I picked up my mobile and dialed Adira’s number- she was busy on another call. I stomped out of the apartment with my new found courage to ask her directly. Before I could close the door behind me- I saw Angad walking out of Adira’s apartment. My head started throbbing; this was all that I needed to see for a confirmation - Adira did ask him to shoo me away, and he had gone to tell her how he had managed to do just as requested. I came back inside and slammed the door behind me. *She must be on a call with Tamanna telling her all about it-* My thoughts were not helping better my head or heartache, I felt like shit.

I decided to lie down on the bed for some time as I felt exhausted and tired due to all the work at the office and then the unwanted brawl downstairs. I will close my eyes for five minutes and then talk to Adira. - I tried to fool myself as my eyes closed down shutting the world around me. It was six-thirty then.

I woke up five minutes later to check the clock “God!” I moaned looking at the wall clock- it was seven thirty already. I looked around the room to see where Rajbir was. I got up and felt the world spin. I sat down on the bed with

my head resting against the wall. This is the last thing I remember before I felt Rajbir standing next to my bed and calling out my name. I opened my eyes to find myself sitting in the same position with drool dripping from the corner of my mouth. My face and neck felt wet because of a lot of sweating. "Are you okay? Since when are you sitting like this and drooling?" he asked helping me sit up properly and placed a pillow behind my back.

"I looked at the wall clock after I got up from sleep. It was seven thirty then" I told him, and both of us turned our faces towards the clock to check what time was it then. "It is seven forty, not very long then " he smiled warmly and offered me some water. "Are you feeling any better now? " he asked me in a concerned voice after I sipped a little water. "I am okay. I have a splitting headache that is all and maybe slight fever" I informed him pressing my temples.

"I do not know what happened. I do not ever faint, and I did not faint. I am quite exhausted and feel very weak" I managed a smile. "I am sure you do not faint," he said and got up to get a thermometer from his first aid kit. I was right, I did have 101 fever, and throat ache too had begun by then. Rajbir arranged paracetamol for me and ordered some soup for my dinner. I felt better once the medicine kicked in. "I do not think I can manage the trip tomorrow," I told me. I did not want to go because of several reasons, and the fever was one of them. "Okay, no issues. We can cancel the trip" he said looking up from his laptop.

"I do not want the trip to be canceled. You guys should go, and I will rest here, undisturbed." I told him, and thankfully he agreed. I finished my soup and asked Rajbir if he could switch off the night lamp next to my bed. MHe asked me to rest and walked out to accompany the rest of the group for their final dinner in the Melbourne. "Shall I tell Adira that you are unwell if she asks me" he quizzed me before leaving. "No, please don't. The last thing that I want from her is her sympathy." I told him categorically, and he left the room, locking it.

All night that night, I lay on the bed looking at the white ceiling above my head. The fever, as well as Angad's words, had hit me hard. What if she doesn't want to be close to me. Angad does know her quite well. What if she had asked him to convey her message to me as I am such a big fool who cannot understand hints. Her eyes have changed, the way she looks at me has

changed. Is this it? The end of a dream. She wants me to let her alone? The thoughts kept zooming in and out of my head all night long. I recall waking up a few times with the same feelings stuck in my heart. I was thankful that I was not going to the Great Ocean Road with the group. *Adira will be happy in my absence and will be able to enjoy her day with Angad-* Anger filled me and then all I can recall is the dim lights in my room. No thoughts rational or otherwise came to me. I was thoughtless and blank for the first time in ages. I could think of nothing, and soon I drifted into the sweet world of dreams.

The next day was no better. The group headed for their trip early in the morning. I received a few phone calls as well as texts from Prateek and Adira asking me why had I not accompanied them. I told Prateek that I was not well and chose not to answer the courtesy texts from Adira- I do not need all this formality from her. I think I have tried as much as I could to find a space in her heart and had no regrets. If she thinks and feels that she will be happier with me out of her life, then so be it. My mind was made up. I hardly ever cried, but that day probably due to the fever, I could not control my tears. They kept on dripping, and I did not stop them for the reason that I knew a broken heart repairs and healed itself only after it has bled enough. These tears were the blood of my wounded heart.

All I did all day was to get up, eat a little and take my medicine and then cry to sleep. While sleeping, I had dreadful images of Adira and Angad hugging each other and getting too close for my comfort. The group was to return by nine in the evening, and we had a flight at seven in the morning next day. I heard them all come back from the dinner. Their laughter pricked my eyes further. *Cry all you want tonite as tomorrow will be a new day-* I promised myself and covered my face with my duvet when I heard Rajbir's footsteps in the apartment. I had packed my bags and stacked them in the living area, one over the other. Rajbir too followed suit and, in time he was on his bed snoring.

Three Days Later

My Home, New Delhi

I was finally completely recovered from the flu. I was to join work Wednesday onwards and still had a day to myself to relax. My mother had been worried about me ever since I came back home. “You have come back with some foreign flu with is not even going away. We have got you check for Swine Flu as well as Bird Flu” my melodramatic mother declared with tears in her eyes. “Relax Mummy. It is nothing. Moreover, I feel much better today as compared to the first day. All I have is a runny nose and no fever. It will go on its own in a few days time” I told her, but she was not the one who could be so easily convinced.

I had last seen Adira at the Indira Gandhi International airport where our flight landed three days ago. Thankfully, I was given a seat next to a stranger on the long, exhaustive sixteen-hour flight. I was happy that I got to have Indian food as we were traveling on an Air India flight. Despite being unwell as well as heart broken, I was delighted and relieved to be going back home, to my people, my country, my home. I slept through most of the flight as there was no point hurting myself looking at Adira and Angad sitting closely together in the aisle next to mine, watching movies and laughing together. My only interaction with Adira all throughout that day was when we had first entered the airport. She asked me why I had not replied any of her calls or texts the day before. “I was and am unwell,” I told her without looking at her. “Come Adira” I heard Angad call her and she walked away from me. I saw her go and join her friends and closed my eyes to hide my pain.

I thought that the recent past had brought us together in an unexplainable sort of way, but it seemed that I was mistaken. It was probably not the way Adira saw it. She looked at me as a friend, all she wanted was friendship, and all she was ready to give was friendship. When she spoke to me openly about her feelings, when she held my hand in the cab, when she placed her hand on my shoulders; I started building my dream castle in the air, slowly and steadily while she meant those things to be only- friendly gestures. Rajbir had warned me of this day, the day when I would want more while she would have placed me in her friend bucket. I was lying in that bucket, struggling to get out and seek her attention, I was trying to get annoyingly close to her. I

felt disgusted every time I recalled the fact that she did not tell me on her own that she wanted me to back off. Instead, she assigned the job to someone else. Maybe because she thought of it as a waste of time, I was a waste of her time- The negative thoughts creep into our brains at the slightest of possibility while it takes us ages to get hold of the positive thoughts and convince them to make our heads their homes.

As soon as we picked up our baggage from the luggage belt, our eyes started searching for our loved ones in the crowd outside. I spotted Rohit, my daddy, and my mother; all three of them waiting for me with warm smiles and rushed to greet them. I made them meet Rajbir and Prateek. Rohit picked up one of my bags, and I picked up the rest. I turned one last time to see Adira. I spotted her coming out of the airport with Angad. *Bastard*- I couldn't help but mutter. My mother placed her hand on my shoulder, and I decided to give my time to the ones who needed me rather than wasting it on the ones who wanted me out of their lives. I walked towards our car, and we headed back to the most fantastic place in the world, home.

One can visit the most exotic places in the world to be marveled by the most extraordinary things but coming back to India, I realized that our country is indeed exceptional. The colors, the rituals, the love, the warmth, value of relations and traditions, harmony in which all the cultures live and bloom, the fact that we find happiness in the smallest of things while we are the ones who are behind the most significant startups. Our colourful and bright festivals, many religions, and their followers who live peacefully and accommodate the changing culture, the respect our cultures teach the young for our elders, the love that we learn to give to our young ones, all this cannot be found together in any other place but my county, my India. While my parents and Rohit bombarded me with their questions about Australia, I looked around and swelled with pride for I missed my homeland.

That evening, I accompanied my mother to an engagement ceremony. We are a big family and more than a few of my cousins; including both near and distant ones, get married every year. Around the time when marriage season is in its full swing, we hardly ever stay at home any evening. There is always some or the other function to attend. While dad and I need only a few minutes to get dressed, mummy begins her ritual around afternoon for an evening get-together. My dad and I never disturb her, and I assumed that the

same protocol would be followed that evening too. But to my surprise, my mother devoted most of her time that evening in my room selecting, then rejecting clothes for me to wear for the function. “I do not think anyone cares what I will be wearing mummy. I go to parties only to stuff myself with good food.” I told her shamelessly grinning at her.

“Here, try this combination” she handed over a white shirt, beige trousers, and a black jacket to me. I took the clothes from her and went into the bathroom to change. I heard my mother talk to someone over the phone while I was getting dressed the millionth time that evening. “Yes, he is. He just returned from Australia” I heard her say. Bragging to someone over the phone, Oh how much I love my mother. *She looks so proud of me.*

“I would rather wear a black trouser with this,” I told mummy stepping out of my bathroom. “Awww look at you. My son is all grown up, and you look so good in these clothes” my melodramatic mother exclaimed with her hands on her cheeks and tears in her eyes. I rolled my eyes at her and said, “I look good in all clothes mummy. Can we please stop this now?”

“Yes of course you do.” she missed the sarcasm in my tone, and it was decided that I would be accompanying her to the function wearing the same set of clothes which she had finally managed to zero upon. I knew that my mummy wanted to show her son off in her social circle, but I failed to understand why did she make me parade in so many clothes that evening. At a wedding all the relatives and friends are either interested in the food, or to criticize the venue and the caterer, gossiping about the groom or the bride or looking at the girls who suddenly start looking like actresses around the wedding season, who looks at a boy? No one. Not even girls, they too just look at what other girls are wearing.

Mummy got busy with her cousins and kitty partners as soon as we arrived. “Be around and answer your phone when I call you” she gave strict instructions, and I promised her to be a call away if she needed me for anything. Dad had decided to skip the party as he had another party to attend.

I parked myself quite close to the dance floor, in the middle of the closed banquet hall. Very loud music played. I was thankful for being unable to hear anything or anyone; even my own heart. It was the perfect place for me to stand and watch as people came and went to and fro. Some dancing, some

drinking some doing both. My mind had been occupied with Adira's thoughts. After coming back, on the heat of the fever and the anger of Angad's words subsided; I reflected upon what had happened in the last few days in Australia - I had managed to be the closest to Adira that I had ever been. Then on one jealous evening, Angad said something, and it took me only a few minutes to forget all that Adira and I had. I believed the words of a man whom I hardly knew instead of confronting the girl whom I knew like I never knew any other girl. I ignored her texts and phone call when they were at the Great Ocean Road and ignored her completely on the flight. Only a fool can do such a thing- I knew this, but I gave my self the benefit of the doubt because I had a high fever. Fever can mess with your brains- With this thought, I messaged Adira as soon as we sat in the car to come to the party. After waiting for a response from her for two hours, I decided to make her a call instead. Her number was switched off. I wondered what had happened. Maybe she has blocked you. The thought crept in, and I dialed her number from a friend's phone. Only to find that her phone was actually switched off.

While I was lost in my thought, I missed three of my mother's phone call and did not know about them until I saw her. Walking straight up to me. The music was still on, and people were going crazy on the dance floor, she came close to my ears and screamed, "Chalo, I want you to meet someone" Who? I wondered as mummy never really made me meet anyone new, and there was no-one at the party whom I knew and had not met already since arriving there.

She held my hand, and we walked towards a table where two young girls and three middle-aged women sat. Thankfully, we could hear the music a little lower at the table. "This is your Seema aunty. You remember her don't you?" my mother gestured towards the lady sitting next to the two girls. Honestly, I didn't know her, but I did know the drill. Whenever mummy says. This is aunty, you know her. I am supposed to bend down and touch the lady in question's feet. I did exactly just that and repeated the drill two more times for the other two ladies at the table who were "Seema Aunty's" sisters. "And this is Bhavna" my mother introduced me to one of the girls. I extend my hand to say hello, and she shook it lightly. I observed that the girls looked like sisters and the one who was introduced to me was probably the elder of the two. She was dressed in a peach-colored salwar suit. Looking at the color, my mind drifted off to my happy place, and I found Adira's picture in a

peach dress in front of me. I shook my head to snap out of it and listened to Bhavna's elaborate introduction which her mother was happily providing. "... Bhavna is a great cook. Why don't you guys plan a lunch with us the coming Sunday, You can meet Bhavna's father too..." I had to call Adira and find out if all was okay with her. "Excuse me," I said and signaled and dialed Adira's mobile number one more time stepping away from the table. The ladies looked at me with disappointment while my mother was visibly angry, I could not understand why. Away from their glaring eyes, I found myself walking back towards the exit.

I do not know for how long had I stood at the exit when my mother finally found me. "Here you are. I have been looking for you everywhere. What happened?" she asked me.

"Nothing" How could I tell her that I was obsessing about the whereabouts of a girl I had a nameless relationship with.

"Come back in then. Seema Aunty wants to talk to you" she held my hand tightly and started walking back to the party.

"I do not remember Seema Aunty or her sister mummy. What will I talk to her about?" I told her honestly. "Have I even met her before?"

"No you haven't, you are right you have never met her before, but that does not matter." She said looking at me, and I realized that I was missing something obvious there. I furrowed my eyebrows and instantly realized that I had picked it up from Adira. *She is not going to leave me alone even in her absence, is she?* I wondered and waited for mummy to elaborate on what she had just said.

"Okay, so Seema is the wife of Dr. Chadda. The vet in Amar Colony who had this huge bungalow in the lane next to Nani's house. The yellow one. Do you recall seeing it?" I knew that place she was talking about but still could not figure out why was it that I had to pretend to know this Seema Aunty. "Nani told her about your big job when you were in Australia, and we are trying to fix you with Bhavna."

"What?" I screamed at her. I was so worried about Adira already, and now there was this new problem to handle. While I had always anticipated the worse to be - Adira being with someone else, I had never pictured that the

situation could turn the other way round too.

“Arre to fix you with Bhavan as in to get the two of you married” my mother explained thinking that my What, was a question for her.

“I understood what you meant by fixing me with her mummy. But I am not ready yet. I cannot get married to her. Do not even think of it” I warned her, at least I thought I did.

“What do mean by not ready yet? There is nothing that you need to be ready for when it comes to marriage. Moreover, I do not care whether you are ready or not. It is my responsibility, and I will get you married soon. Now come on, walk back with me and do not make a scene here” she took me by my hand, and I had no option but to walk back and sit through a session with ladies from the Vet’s house.

I will not bore you with the details of the group session as I was mentally absent from it most of the time myself. Bhavna seemed like a sweet girl. We shook hands once again before leaving the party, and on my way back home I told my mother that I did not like Bhavna.

When we reached home, my mother continued her one-sided conversation with me; a thing that she had mastered in the last many years. I declared my intentions of not getting married to Bhavna one more time before I locked myself up for the night in my bedroom.

That evening I revisited an old friend, my diary. I began writing down my thoughts in my journal when I was in school. Then, it was usually about the growing up issues, my looks, the bullies at school. Once I wrote a page on Rohit and my friendship and gifted the same to him. That was the only piece of writing which was still there as my mother had accidentally sold off the three diaries from my school days to the scrap boy who came to collect my school books and a broken bicycle when I cleared my class twelfth board exams.

I picked up a black Reynolds pen and flipped the pages until I reached a blank page. I put my pen down on the sheet of paper. The ink from the tip made an impression on the paper, a dot. It was a full stop; a full stop which was probably the fate of my relationship with Adira. I wondered if she had changed her number because she did not want me to call her. The dot on the

paper looked like an indication, a sign.

After meeting Bhavna, I knew that I had very less time at hand. I had to give my love a chance to live. I looked at the diary again. The dot was still there, I moved my pen over it and made a small swirl at the end. I turned it into a comma. It is nothing but a pause in our story; an awkward pause. It cannot be the end; it cannot be over yet. I thought to myself and set the alarm on my phone for seven in the morning the next day. I was going back to work the next day, and she was too. I had to make it happen- I have to tell her tomorrow.

And I started scribbling-

"Love filled a space in my heart, space which I did not know even existed."

"Your love was like a serene sunset. I was mesmerised beyond words by it before it left me alone in the darkness."

"For long I have not been able to find myself, I am still lost in you."

Next Day At Work

I reached office sharp at nine thirty, one by one the entire team showed up; all but Adira. We all knew our job roles and got on with them. Rajbir was busy in multiple meetings with senior management all through the day and hardly got to spend any time with the team. I wondered why Adira did not show up on our first day at work at Gurgaon office but with Rajbir neck deep in work all day, I did not know who else to check with. *Angad would know, but he will never tell me, I can ask Sakshi only if Angad leaves her side.* - I decided. Most of my day was spent in worrying about Adira. I wrote and rewrote a report three times before getting it right.

Finally, at around five; I saw Sakshi head towards the pantry for a coffee break. I locked my system and followed her there. "Sakshi" I called her name out as soon as I spotted her in the pantry. She was sipping her coffee, she raised her head from her phone's screen and smiled at me. "I need to ask you something," I told her before posting my inquiry. "I am not sure yaar, her phone is switched off," Sakshi told me further increasing my worries. I decided to raise the alarm as no one was aware where she was, I walked up to Prateek's desk.

"I know her phone is switched off. She has not done the right thing. Even I tried to call her as soon as I got to know from Rajbir." Prateek told me, his words were no less than a riddle for me.

"What did you get to know?" I asked him surprised.

"Ohhh, I thought you knew! Adira has resigned."

"What!" I exclaimed unable to believe his words.

"Yes! She did not even once think about all the money" I lost him there. Adira had resigned, her number was still switched off, and she did not respond to my message on Facebook.

I was relieved to know that all was well with her, but I wondered what had happened which lead to her immediate resignation. The reality stung my heart- She was gone, again; and again and I failed to tell her how much I loved her.

The Next Four Months

Adira did respond to my message on Facebook two days after I had sent it. It was a casual reply telling me that all was well with her and her family. We chatted a little that day, she wanted a break from Delhi and had moved back to Chandigarh with her mother. She told me that she was taking some time off technology and will be away from mobile phones, Facebook, and other messengers.

I will get in touch with you again as soon as I get a new number here in Chandigarh. Take Care!

This was her last message for me. Since then, I had not heard from her. No messages or phone calls. She deactivated her Facebook account, and I followed suit, after all, I had made the account only to be close to her.

It was very tough for me to forget her, to forget all that we had, to forget all that we could have had; had she given me a chance. But she was not the only one at fault, and I knew that very well too.

I busied myself with my office work so much that during any time of the day, I had nothing else to think about. Bosses were impressed with me, and I was told that most likely I was to be promoted during the next appraisals. I did not care about evaluations or promotions. All I cared for was to have enough things to do in a day to keep my mind off Adira. To be honest, I did quite well a job at keeping her thoughts away from me during the day. It was the nights which brought with them her fond memories, which had started to scare me. I used to reach home at eleven at night and was usually in the bed by twelve. From the time my head hit the pillow till the time I slept, everything that we did together in Australia, every moment spent in each other's company haunted me. I wondered how she was but had no way to find out.

I was sure of one thing though; she never felt the same way as I felt for her; for if she did she would have not just turned to walk away and never look back. Like clockwork; days and nights passed but nothing changed.

Rajbir was my manager's manager now, and my interactions with him were strictly professional. We did go out on a few break together even now and then, but he never touched Adira's topic. He was not happy with the way she had suddenly resigned and maybe even knew about my heartbreak.

I tried to bleed on my diary with my words but the way they came out on the paper- I sunk deeper into sadness.

Finally, good news came to me. I received a text from Piyush with Adira's new number. I had gone to India gate with my friends for a quick Ice cream that evening. Most of my friends were busy looking around and talking to each other, so I dialed her number after contemplating for a while whether or not to call her. She did not answer and message saying that she was a little busy and she will call back in a while. I knew her well enough to tell that the in a While would never happen. My pain made my eyes water, the sky too opened up and cried with me that evening. The raindrops did good work at helping me hide my tears.

That evening, I found myself revisiting the old pages my diary and travel back in time. I turned the stained ink pages and traced my feelings written in ink on them with my fingers.

My fingers froze when they touched these words - *You and I, I and You; We lived, We laughed, We played, We loved, but We could never be We because we were - I and You.*

13th February 2017

Piyush and Tamanna were finally getting married. All of us were happy. Their wedding rituals and functions were to last for seven long days. It was the last day; the actual wedding ceremony was to take place at Tivoli Gardens, Chattarpur. Months had gone since I had seen Adira and it had been many days when I last spoke to anyone about her. “Is Adira coming?” I had asked Piyush quite casually the day he came over to give us our wedding invitations. “Tamanna wants her to, and she did visit her mother’s house in Chandigarh to invite them as well. Let’s see” he told me with a concerned look on his face. For the first time, there was no sarcasm or mischief in his eyes as he spoke to me about her. I bowed my head down to hide the hope in my heart. Despite all the time which had passed, I could not make myself move on. Her thoughts still dominated my nights, and it was getting tough to occupy my days enough to keep her memories from invading my mind.

Finally, the much awaited week of their wedding arrived. Day after day, I went to every venue, attended every function in a hope to see her only to be met with disappointment. She did not come.

“Ufff! Why are you not dressed yet? We need to meet a family before the Varmala happens as after that there is just too much noise, and one can hardly hear anything” my mother gave me instructions as I tried my blue necktie. “I am ready,” I told her later thinking whether it was my mind telling me that I was ready to move on and meet this other girl. Maybe!

We reached Tivoli Gardens on time, two hours after the time given to the bride’s family. As per the Delhi wedding standards, we were better than ninety percent of wedding parties. As the entire group danced outside, my mother took my dad holding our hands into the banquet and me. “Nahi Aunti Ji. The groom needs to cut the ribbons first” Piyush’s pretty sister in laws protested. “That is not needed” mummy declared and held the ribbon in her hand. The girls looked at her in horror as mummy lifted the fabric up and made space for us to pass under it. I heard the girls mumble but there was little me or dad could do about it. Once mummy puts her mind to something; nobody and nothing can stop her.

The girl and her family sat at the center as we arrived. She was a sweet

looking girl. Our parents talked about general things while I looked busily towards my phone to avoid a conversation with the girl. We sat there until the ribbon was finally cut and the Barat entered in.

“I need to be a part of the Varmala,” I told everyone and got on to my heels.

For about half an hour, nothing happened and then suddenly the DJ announced that the bride was coming towards the stage. A big screen descended from nowhere in front of us and lived video started playing showing the bride walking towards the stage. The cameraman began by showing the steps of the bride and her friends and then painfully slowly he moved the camera upwards. One could tell which one was the bride was, dressed in a bright red dress was Tamanna in the middle. The girl on her right was dressed what appeared like a golden saree, the girl on the bride’s left wearing a green parrot outfit. The cameraman focussed at the varmala (Garland) in the bride’s hand. It was made of purple and pink carnations. We teased Piyush as his bride approached. I looked back at the screen, and my heart was in my mouth. The girl dressed in golden saree wore a silver charm bracelet in her left hand. In her right hand, she wore two golden bangles, I have seen those- I knew who it was before the camera moved to her beautiful face. As soon as the cameraman moved up towards their faces, women were heard going gaga over the beautiful bride and her attire. My eyes were stuck on only one face, and finally, the breath held in my lungs escaped with her name- Adira.

It is challenging to talk to a girl at her friend’s wedding, and I tell you this with experience. Adira was always surrounded by others girls or guys for the time Tamanna was on the stage. The moment Tamanna got off the stage, Adira became her wing-woman. Finally, I spotted her standing alone in a corner. The Pandit was chanting mantras, and the bride and groom were taking phere around the sacred fire. Mummy and dad sat sleepily at one of the tables, and so did the others. It was one at night.

“Hi” I whispered from behind her.

“Ohh! You scared me” she said turning pink.

“I am sorry. I did not mean to” I said thinking of a way to begin a conversation.

“No don’t be. In fact, I am sorry” she said and helped me out of my dilemma.
“ I am sorry for have vanished like that after...”

“After?” I wanted to hear her talk to me; her voice was like a soothing balm on my bruised feelings.

“After everything. But I was scared.” she looked down at her bracelet.

“Scared of what?” *Did I scare her?*

“I was scared that once you knew me enough, you would leave me too, like him. And I was getting too involved. I did not want to be heartbroken again”
I saw her eyes water

“So you broke mine.” I looked at her face.

She looked at me with hope, and I knew that it was hope, something told me, and I decided to do what I had always dreamt of. I held her by her shoulders and brought her close to me. Before I could change my mind, I placed my left hand behind her back and hugged her. I hugged her tight as I had read somewhere that only a tight hug can put all the pieces of a broken heart together. Her heart was broken, it had to be repaired before she could love me and trust me with all her heart.

I felt her hands behind my back, she moved them up to my shoulders, and at that moment I felt that all was not lost after all. She sobbed like a child and apologized many times. Sometime later, I freed her, and she stood before me with her eyes low. “Why did you not call me again? I was so scared to call you back after you disconnected my calls in Australia. And then you ignored me at the airport” she asked sobbing.

“Adira” someone called her from behind.

“Tell me,” she asked me again before turning away and going with her friend.

I stood there for a few minutes thinking of how to go about it and then took out my mobile to call her number.

“Adira! Happy Valentines Day.” I said as soon as she answered

“Happy Valentines Day” she replied with a smile in her voice.

“I want to rectify my mistake. I am sorry I did not call you again. I know I should have. I am sorry, and I have called you now to talk. Can we talk, about us?” I said in one breath, and she giggled like a young girl.

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SHRAVYA BHINDER - AUTHOR



I will be glad to hear from you.

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