Chasing Dreams

I ran my hands along the smooth fabric of the curtains and straightened them out one last time. I scanned the couch and chairs to check if the cushions were all in place. I went over to the appetizers spread and the made sure the vegetarian and the non-vegetarian snacks were properly separated. The drinks glasses were spotless, the decorative lights were working fine and they were all switched on. I took a deep breath and turned on the light music.

Anita, my wife, as always made sure all the guests were greeted properly at the door and all their coats were hanged neatly. My son, Yash, was delighted to see some of his friends and didn’t waste any time to go and start playing their favourite multi-players computer games. I made sure everyone who walked in had their preferred drink in hand. The two maids were offering everyone snacks with a smile on their faces. Everyone was all compliments about the house they just stepped in.

So it was finally happening – my dream apartment and my dream family. And I am celebrating it with all my friends. This, right here, is everything that I ever worked for.

Anyone who knows me says I’m living my dream.

And I am very proud of it.

I was going to each and every guest, asking them about their lives, making sure they’re comfortable and having a good time. I was repeating the same answers about my life to 20 different people and then some more. They were complimenting how beautiful my new apartment is, what a wonderful person Anita is, what a bright kid my son is, and how hard I worked for my last promotion and how much I deserved it. My heart swelled with happiness and pride.

Everything was going smooth and exactly how it was supposed to, till one particular person walked in through the door with a bottle of wine and an extremely familiar smile. A smile that I had never expected to see even when I sent the invitation email after a lot of hesitation. I saw my wife point me out to that guest and she turned to me with the smile and the feeling of nostalgia drowned me.

I completely forgot about the guests I was talking to and immediately walked over to Parvati, one of my best friends in college. She was still the small tomboy, who has now grown her hair out to her shoulders and was wearing a grungy hipster looking dress. We hugged each other and let out a huge sigh as we realised that we were both thinking of the same person at that exact moment. The third Musketeer in our tiny group – Akash.

‘You made it!’ I exclaimed, because I honestly thought she won’t.

**‘I happened to be in town for a few days, so how could I not?’ She still has the same boyish tone in her voice. Gosh, I missed her!**

‘It’s been too long,’ I handed her a glass of champagne and raised my own glass. ‘Here’s to a tiny unexpected reunion.’

‘Like Akash would say, “Keep the booze and the happiness coming!”’ We both drank to the good old times as painful memory kept tugging at the back of our minds.

I gave her a tour of the apartment and walked out into the balcony. The view of a nearby golf course and a few lakes here and there was truly amazing from the 11th floor.

She told me about her boutique, her various lines of clothing and how things have been looking pretty good. She never married, like she had predicted back in college and is living with her current boyfriend who is out of station for a business tour. The air of depression and despair that I had seen around her the last we saw each other was completely gone. As she was looking over at the view and laughing heartily, I was reminded of the impossible storm that we both had to fight through. I could not express in words how happy I felt to see her like this right now.

We talked about all the quirky memories we had of college, starting from each and every student we could remember the name and face of, the canteen food, the professors, the cleaning staff, the security guards, the college events, excursions and trips, exams, study groups, everything!

I was missing Akash so much that I wanted to talk about him. We talked about Akash as we were recalling our hilarious times in college, but we skipped talking about the actual thing – the one big event that changed all our lives. I couldn’t understand whether I should say anything or not.

**‘You’re thinking about him, aren’t you?’ Parvati asked after noticing the long silence as I was looking down at my glass for quite a few seconds. I looked up at her.**

‘I know,’ she said ‘I am too.’

‘I still miss him,’ I admitted.

‘You think I don’t?’ she said, taking a long sip from her glass. ‘That asshole didn’t keep any of the promises he made. He disappeared too soon, taking so many things with him.’

I reached out to hold her hand and we stood there like that for a few minutes, holding hands and staring ahead. I still remember hiding all of Parvati’s love letters for Akash in my text books. She used to write one every now and then for all the years, so that she could save them all and give him everything the day we pass out. Parvati never got the chance to tell Akash what she really felt for him. And now she never will.

‘I thought Tara had also disappeared, till I saw her yesterday.’

**That name made me freeze my thoughts. Thousands of memories washed over me like a tsunami and my heart just stood there, taking the brunt of it all. I looked at Parvati and found myself unable to ask her anything more. I almost could not believe what she just said.**

Parvati noticed my shocked expression and elaborated, ‘I did! She was shopping for some travel bags in Royal Star Mall and we ran into each other. She is still exactly the same, hasn’t changed a bit. She’s doing this freelance photography gig and she’s travelling everywhere! She looked good, happy. She is clearly living her dream.’

She paused to look at me for a while and then said, ‘She asked me about you too.’

‘Why does she even care anymore?’ I asked her and myself at the same time.

‘She never stopped, Kunal,’ Parvati said.

Those words made me feel like someone was squeezing my chest from the inside. As much as I had tried, it was still immensely hard to forget about her. As much I tried to convince myself that what I did was right for both of us, it still killed me. I had spent way too long imagining how different my life would have been if we were still together.  Things started looking up when Anita stepped into my life and we decided to turn over a new leaf together.

 I decided to never look back and I have been very successful at doing that.

Till now. Till right this moment.

‘It would have never worked, Parvati. You know that very well.’ I told her, trying to sound as convincing as I could.

‘Who are you trying to convince, me or yourself?’ She was looking right into my eyes. I had to look away.

‘I have seen you with her for so many years, you idiot. I have also seen you without her, and trust me, you both fit. Not just as a romantic couple, but as people. Everyone knew what you two shared with each other is impossible to find. You were not just some couple who were madly in love. It was a lot more than that. But then again, you already know that, don’t you?’

‘We were wild and reckless and impulsive,’ I recalled. ‘She was the crazy one who thought chasing impossible dreams was all she could do for the rest of her life. She had no idea what she wanted and she didn’t care either. That kind of shit only works till you have to actually get out of college and find out how to achieve what you really need. I have reached this point in my life after working my ass off. She will never be able to find what I have if her idea of living is uselessly jumping around from one place to another.’

‘It’s a good thing then,’ said Parvati, sounding perfectly calm and composed, ‘that she never needed anyone’s approval about how she lives her life. And to be honest, from what I can see, you still have no idea what you really want.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

**We both decided to end that conversation right there.**

The rest of the evening went as planned and everyone left in good spirits. When it was time for Parvati to leave, I wanted to see her off and hail her a cab. Just before getting in, she gave me this knowing look and shoved a piece of napkin in my pocket. Before I could figure out why she did that, the cab had already pulled away.

I took out the napkin to find a message written inside.

“21/A Herrington Road. She’s leaving tomorrow.”

She didn’t need to write me the name of the person who’s address that was. And I hated her for doing that. I wanted to throw away the napkin right then, but something made me tuck it back inside and walk back upstairs.

The next morning I got in the driver’s seat the exact same time that I always do and started the car.

Before I know it, I was there. I was standing right outside her building, my heart pounding like a mad man.

I checked her name and apartment number at the gate and ran up to the fourth floor. After fighting with myself for almost half an hour, I rang the doorbell.

There was absolutely no guarantee that she would answer. She might have had an early flight or something and already left. Maybe I was too late. Again.

But the door flung open. And it was her.

The big dark brown eyes, the huge mane of messed up curly black hair, the same pale skin, those full pink lips. She was exactly the same Tara I had fallen in love with the first day of college.

Her bright smile lighted up her face as she saw me standing there in front of her. That is what occupied my whole mind, I couldn’t think of anything else.

Neither of us was surprised to find each other on either side of this door. She looked at me the same way she always did when I used to come over to her room for our numerous study sessions which hardly ever included any studying.

**She looked at me as if all the years that had gone by after college just disappeared. I was the only one who got older and seemed out of place in this whole situation right now, wearing this stupid suit with my hair and shoes all clean and proper. But who was I really kidding?**

I’ve always loved messy. I’ve always loved Tara.

Right now, it seems like we are exactly back to where we had left off all those years ago. Tara broke the silence after a long time.

‘You missed me.’

**‘Just like you said I would.’**