The landline rang after a long time. Mohan waited for a while before he decided to pick it up. He longed to hear a familiar voice. Someone spoke up, “Is this Mohan Pandey?” Mohan confirmed. The voice continued, “How are you, Mohan? Did you recognize me? I’m Aakash, from GES.” Mohan already knew who he was. The voice continued, without letting Mohan speak, “It has been so many years my friend. Where have you been? I was not sure whether I would be able to contact you on this number. I got it from the college directory.”

Mohan was equally excited to hear his college friend Aakash’s voice after a long time. But, soon the happiness of the moment was marred, when he was reminded of the last day of college and when he left his friends with a heavy heart. His moment of reminiscence was broken when Aakash interrupted, “Where have you been? What did you do all these years? I tried to contact you, but your phone kept ringing. Where are you working now?”

Mohan had answers to all his questions, but he did not attempt to reply. The voice continued, “I guess you are the same old introvert like you were in college, not saying a single word. Ok, listen, the reason I called is something else. We are planning to meet this Saturday, and I wanted to check if you will be able to come. Remember that shop near our college, we are planning to meet up there. Are you free? Will you be able to make it?”

Yes, Mohan thought, he was free, but he cannot come. Mohan managed to reply, “Okay, I will come, what time?” Aakash said, “Great, everybody will be there by 6 PM. Amol, Abdul, Mahesh and, probably, Mira too.” Another span of memories crowded Mohan’s thoughts. He replied, “6 PM is a bit early for me, I will come by 7.30 PM, if it is okay?” Aakash paused, and then said, “Okay, but don’t be too late.”

Aakash continued, “See you then, Mohan. It’s been so long. It will be so nice to meet up with old friends. By the way, your voice has changed a lot. Hope you are still the same old Mohan.” Aakash laughed and dropped the receiver with a goodbye.

Same old Mohan? He wanted to be, but a lot has changed in his life. This was just Wednesday, and two more days to meet up with his old gang. Mohan was excited about meeting his old friends, and someone he admired. He opened his cupboard and saw a couple of new shirts. He has not worn new clothes for quite some time now. He chose one, and once he was ready, he looked out of the window. Though, it was only 5 PM, the dusk had already started to set in, the sky was covered with black clouds, it might rain.

The darkness had unfurled itself, earlier than usual. Mohan locked his door and left. It felt like an unusual and new journey for him. He reached by 6 PM, but hid himself nearby and waited for others to assemble. He did not want to be the first to reach the shop.

Soon, he saw Aakash Tripathi, reach the small cafe around the end of the road. It was one of their favourite places for tea-coffee, snacks, discussions and a lot more. The shop still had the same owner, Mr. Basudeb Roy. Mohan saw Aakash walk up to him to say something. He had aged, but it seemed that he remembers their gang.

Mohan still waited for the other people to join. It was getting darker, as the clouds covered the sky with a heavy blanket of darkness. Mohan was so eager to meet them all, but something held him back.

As time flew past, a few more familiar faces joined in. They have changed a lot over the years, but still they looked familiar. Mohan reminisced his good old college days with them. He was still waiting for someone special to come, Mira.

Mohan was head over heels for Mira. She was a strong and independent woman, quite contrasting to the contemporary women of that time. She was their close friend, and many envied them because she was the only girl in the gang. Mohan loved the way she thinks, her ideas, and most importantly, her happy-go-lucky nature. Mira did not know about his secret admiration for her, and considered him as a good friend. He had decided to speak to her before they left college, on the last day. However, that moment did not come. Mohan wondered how she looked, and what was going on in her life after 6 years of leaving college. He was impatient to find out.

Aakash kept looking at his watch, probably wondering when will the rest of them join. He also must be wondering if Mohan will come or not. In an era, where mobile phones were not invented, all they did was wait. Mohan was still not ready to go inside. He decided to move a bit closer to listen to the conversation that they were having. Cautiously, he chose a dark corner outside the cafe, almost next to the window where they were sitting. He could see them, but they could not make out if Mohan was there.

Suddenly, Mohan saw something, which brought a spark in his eyes, and an old pain in his heart. It was Mira. She looked different, very different. The saree, the jewelry, the bag, everything was different about her, it was almost the opposite of what she was in college, at least how Mohan remembers her. But, still she looked beautiful as ever, her eyes had the same confidence and her lips had that heartwarming smile.

Then, Mohan noticed something, which made him both happy and sad. The red vermillion on her forehead was of no significance to him, but it somehow affected him. Soon, Paritosh came from behind her and put his arms around her shoulder. They looked married. Mohan was happy that Mira looked happily married to someone, who deserved her. And, a bit sad too, because on that rainy night, when they had a moment together under the tea stall shade, he should have just told her how he felt. Alas, now it was too late.

Distracted from his thoughts by a loud honk of a passing vehicle, Mohan decided to go in and meet his friend, now that everyone was there. He wondered how they will react, and most importantly, how he will handle. He left on his last day of college without a word with his friends, as there had been a mishap at his home. His dad had passed away. He got a call early in the morning, and he packed his bags and left. He wondered what all questions his friends might ask him after so many years, and what will he reply.

It was dark outside on the streets and people were hurrying as it was about to rain heavily. The cafe lights were yet to be switched on because they were the only people there, and the table near the window was beautifully lighted by the dark clouds. It started drizzling, and soon the heavy rains set in. Mohan decided to go in.

He overheard Aakash saying, “Mohan will also come. I called him and he said he will join us, but he will be late. I wonder how things are with him. I guess none of us had any contact with him until now. I had called his landline a couple of times earlier, but there was no response. But that day, he picked up the phone. He hardly spoke. I guess he is still his introvert self. But he was such a nice guy, a genuine person at heart and always ready to help others, even if his own financial conditions were not that good. It will be great to meet him after so many years.” The others agreed. Mohan was so happy that his friends still remember him and with fond memories. Till now, he was listening to their conversation, as they were discussing old college days and memories. How he loved to be a part of each and every one of those memories.

With a smile on his face, remembering those memories, Mohan decided to finally go in. Suddenly, he stopped hearing a voice. He saw Abdul coming in. Oh, how can he forget about him. He was his best friend and roommate in college. Someone, who helped him through everything, a boy with a gut and determined to take down anything which was wrong. Abdul had not changed at all- well-built, tall figure, a determined look on his face and a grinning smile. Mohan felt sad that he could not say goodbye to him either, when he left. He must have wondered why.

Abdul was greeted by Aakash and others. Mohan was glad to know that Abdul worked with a leading newspaper as a reporter. He always had that aggressive side to himself, and a knack for the truth. Now, it was already raining outside, and Abdul was almost wet. As, he started tidying his clothes, Aakash said, “So, all of us are here, except Mohan. He had said that he will be here. Hope, he reaches soon. It is already raining.”

A moment of pause, and Abdul spoke, “Mohan?” His pale, shocked face scared Mohan too. Aakash added, “Yes, I called him on Wednesday, and he said he will come by 7.30 PM. He knows this place very well.”

Abdul could not believe his ears, “You called Mohan, and he answered your call? And, he said that he will come?”

Aakash, smiled and said, “Yes, what is so unbelievable in this?” Everybody else kept looking at Abdul with keen eyes.

Mohan no longer wished to go inside, he knew that Abdul KNEW. But, how?

Abdul sat with a blank face, not a single word. He looked pale. Paritosh gave him a glass of water, “Are you alright? What happened?”

Abdul finished the glass at once, and looked up to everybody. They were waiting for an answer.

Finally, he spoke, “But, Mohan and his entire family died 4 years ago in a road accident. I also went to his house, and it was locked. So, how...”

There was a long pause. Everybody sat on their chairs with a thud. They could not believe what they heard. Abdul never lies and he doesn’t like to play pranks. So, they knew it was true.

Mira asked nevertheless, “Abdul, what a joke, seriously.”

Abdul replied, “It’s not a joke, Mira. I had just joined the local newspaper as a trainee around that time, and was working on a report on road accidents on that bridge. I went through old newspapers and contacted the police for my research. As I was going through the information, I saw Mohan’s name there. I was shocked. I went to his house because I had been there before. The neighbors told me that his father died two years back, which is why Mohan left college, without a notice. Then, they were going through a tough time. Four years ago, they were on their way to their village for some work, and a road accident killed Mohan, his widowed mother and his sister. Since then, their house is locked and sealed by the police.”

Everybody paused to realize what was happening. Aakash spoke, “I had also called him a couple of time earlier, but no one answered. But on that day someone picked up the phone, and it sounded like Mohan. He spoke very less, but he had said that he will come. And if this is true, why didn’t you say anything on that day, Abdul, when I called and told you who all are coming?”

Abdul gave a surprised look, “But you never mentioned Mohan’s name.” He took a moment to recall. “Oh, wait, when you called, there was some disturbance on the phone, and you must have said his name in the end, and I was not able to hear as there was a loud noise in the background, and I did not catch it.” The silence inside seemed more vocal than the sound of the rain outside.

All this while, Mohan’s body stood outside, but his soul wanted to barge in hug his friends. But alas, it is not his destiny to meet his friends again. He was not able to say goodbye on the last day of college, and he will never be able to say good-bye EVER. He looked at his friends for the last time, before vanishing into thin air.