

My plan is the day Hari gets a job, I will introduce him to Dad. I mean, Dad will still flip his lid, but at least there would be something going for Hari. Right now, he is a little bit of a loser if you ask me. Sorry, if I am being mean. But in some ways, he is. For one thing, he is besotted with Ryan. "Ryan this, Ryan that," bugs me no end sometimes. I don't think this Ryan guy is all that cool. Wears branded clothes, but that is only because his parents are loaded. I personally think behind all this guy's aggression there is a vacuum.

See, that is the thing with these IIT guys and their college, they all are too wrapped up in the bricks and walls to know who they really are and what they really want. I want to tell them – before you get all gung-ho about working for the future, work out your past and present but that will just sound so grandma-ish and I am, well, so young.

Well, that is all I shall write for now. I promise to write again, and I promise to be good. But do not tell Dad and Mom what I've been babbling about. See, I kept your last promise and have not told anyone about your letter to me how much ever that broke me, so keep mine. Yes, I know Mom would not have been able to take it. She hardly speaks these days anyway. Why did you leave us Bhaiyya? It isn't fair, you know that, right?

*Missing you,
Neha*

13

One More Year Later

WE WERE DRINKING ON THE INSTI ROOF. THIRD YEAR students now, alcohol no longer a novelty. This meant we could drink less and not throw up every time to certify having a good time. We were drowning our sorrows today for two reasons. Firstly, after a year of working the files, the mechanical engineering department had coolly rejected Ryan's lube project proposal. Secondly, I had messed up yet another viva. When it came to screwing vivas, I am the man you want!

"Screw the lube project. I have wasted too much time on it. But look at you, Hari. It is so bloody typical of you. Why do you get so tongue-tied?" Ryan said, in whose veins confidence corpuscles flowed larger than red.

"I wish I knew." I squinted, frustrated.

"You know the answer to the viva questions. You know the answers, right?" That was Alok.

I nodded my head. It was pointless. Three years of practice in vivas did not leave me any less petrified.

"Ryan, you know I hate vivas. But c'mon man. You must feel like crap," I said.

"What crap? I only did ten night outs on the proposal, the revised proposal and spent like a hundred hours in the lab. But in the end, Cherian shot it down. 'Too optimistic and fantastic,' he said. I could wring his bloody neck," Ryan announced.

"But you know your idea is good," Alok said flatly.

"Of course it is. Even Prof Veera thinks so. But Cherian doesn't, and he is the head. Anyway, screw it."

"Is it completely over?" I said.

"From my side. Prof Veera might try private sponsorship or something. Pretty much over though I should say," Ryan said.

Alok sat quietly, picking his nose and sipping his vodka. It was disgusting, but it didn't bother me anymore. It is amazing how habit immunizes you.

I looked fully at Alok. "At least you are happy."

"Happy?" Alok echoed, "good joke."

"Now what happened?" I said.

"Nothing. Nothing bloody happens in my life situation. That is why I am never happy. Sister needs to get married, that is the latest I guess."

Alok had a point. A miserable home, pointless grades and loser friends was hardly the route to happiness. At least he had the joy of picking dirt out of his nose in the company of his friends.

"How's Neha?" Alok said.

"She's fine. That is the only thing that keeps me in IIT," I said.

"Yeah right. Have you gotten any further though?" Ryan said.

"Like what? I have kissed her now you know," I said.

"Yes, but like ten years ago. And there is much more than that. You know that right? Or do you get tongue-tied in front of her as well."

Alok tittered.

"Screw you Ryan," I said, "Neha is not that type of girl."

"But you are *that* type of boy. So make her *that* way," he said.

"How?"

"I can't tell you everything."

Once it was dark we decided to return to Kumaon. Time did go on, and thank god for that. For that meant we only had so many fewer days left in this place.

"I'll be happy when college is over," I said.

"At least we have perfected the C2D," Alok said.

"Of course," Ryan said and smirked, "when was the last time each of us did his own assignment?"

"It still scares me sometimes though," I said.

"Why? The profs never read the crap they give us carefully. They'll never find out," Ryan dismissed, cocky as ever.

"I heard Cherian is anal though," Alok said.

We'd find out soon; it was finally time for Cherian to start teaching industrial engineering and management or Indem.

"Yes, the bastard will teach us finally. I am not attending any of his classes," Ryan said.

"You don't have to. It's Hari's course under C2D," Alok said and winked, "our guy wants to impress the dad."

"Well, at some point I do want Neha to tell her dad about me. Wouldn't be a good start if I skip all his classes," I said.

"I hate him," Ryan said simply.

No one skipped Cherian's first class. That is, no one apart from Ryan. I was curious to see in person the devil who tormented my girlfriend and my best friend. Others went to see the head of the mechanical engineering department of the best engineering college in the country. They said Cherian was a perfect 10 in his IIT student days. I didn't know much about the man, apart from the fact that his daughter was a perfect 10 to me.

I had reached five minutes early, and for the first time in three years, had taken a seat in the first row. I don't know why, but I really wanted to do well in his course. Perhaps an A in Indem might give a good first impression, leading the way for Neha to introduce me. It just sounded better – "Dad, meet Hari – the guy who topped your Indem course," rather than "Dad, meet Hari. The loser who scraped a C in your course."

Prof Cherian walked in precisely at nine, and brought with him a huge pile of books as if he had just robbed a library.

"Pay attention everyone. Let us start with the lecture," he began in a firm voice.

There is something about seeing your girlfriend's parent for the first time. I couldn't help but notice how Cherian was an extremely bad replica of Neha. Like her wax statue had puffed up first and then begun to melt haphazardly. He had the same jaw and round face like hers, however, his face was twice as big, with chunks of loose flesh hanging where Neha had these

super-smooth, taut cheeks. Instead of Neha's long and beautiful hair, Cherian had a bald spot bigger than a Nirula's hamburger. If she dressed to act in a horror movie, Neha would look like her father.

"Time and motion studies are the essence of Indem. As engineers you should be able to reduce human actions to measurable tasks and stop talking there in the third row," Cherian said as he threw a piece of chalk at two students who had found a private joke too good to resist sharing it in class.

"Meet your father-in-law," Alok whispered.

"Looks like he can eat me alive," I said.

Cherian heard the whispers and stopped writing on the board. He turned around and banged a duster on the table. "No one talks for the next sixty minutes," he pronounced in a no-nonsense tone that would make Saddam Hussein shudder, "is that clear?"

Chalk dust formed a cloud as if Cherian had burst a grenade in the classroom. Behind this, one could barely see his contorted face. I wondered how Neha had spent an entire life living with him, wanting to rescue her that very instant. I thought of eloping with her, making the escape through the roof while Cherian slept. But where would I take her? The hostel was hardly handy, what with all of us sleeping in one room.

Cherian's first example of time and motion study was of a shirt factory. Let us say there were five workers, now they could either make individual shirts each, or one could divide the shirt making tasks. For instance, the first worker could cut the cloth, the second worker put in the first stitch, the third sews buttons and so on and so forth.

"This breakdown of tasks is called an assembly line. But you have to ensure that each task is of equal time to avoid bottlenecks."

Therefore, if cutting cloth took six minutes and the first stitch took three, two workers could do the first job. "This way, you can have a fast assembly line. Workers focus and get more skilled at their tasks. And what is more, you don't need extra equipment – like instead of five scissors, you need only one," Cherian said.

It all sounded very reasonable. After all, that is what engineers should do right? Tell workers how to work more efficiently, thinking up clever ways to save resources.

"He makes sense," I said.

"Just take notes. Anything can come in the quiz," Alok said.

The Fatso will remain a loser, I thought, except at nose, where his pickings were rich. I mean, I am no great thinker or anything, but sometimes one does listen in class. All this guy wanted to do was mug in class and puke in tests. I thought of discussing Indem with Ryan.

Sixty minutes later, Cherian put his chalk down. He modified the shirt example ten times, to show various time and resource allocation combinations. In typical IIT fashion, the simple example somehow converted into complex equations. The prof gave an assignment for the next class using these equations, which meant two hours at least in the library that night.

"Are you stupid. You found this Indem crap interesting," Ryan said as I told him about the class.

"Why? Think about it, instead of each person cutting and then sewing..."

"So, you want to reduce each tailor to a cloth cutter or button sewer. What are they, bloody robots?"

"No, just being smart. See if you apply the optimization equation..."

"Screw the equation. What do you want the worker to say at home? That I made ten shirts today? Or that I cut fifty pieces of cloth? Do you realize how mind-numbing each job will become?"

"That is silly," I said, "it is about improved efficiency."

"But what if each worker wants to make his own shirt and wants to improve the design? It is just the same Cherian crap, treat humans like mindless machines."

"I think you should attend his class, Ryan. I can't explain it. He seemed to make sense."

"Of course, he makes sense to you. You want to nail his daughter that's why."

"Aw, shut up, just come to class all right. It is high time you give this system a chance."

"It's a screwed up system, so no more chances. Now, give me the assignment so I can cog it."

I met Neha outside the insti gate for a walk-date. A walk-date is where you go with your girlfriend for a long walk to get some fresh air and quality conversation, or at least you say so. The real great thing about walk-dates is that they are free. To me, nearly broke as it was my turn to fill Ryan's scooter tank last time, it was the obvious choice. Neha chose the route, a five-kilometer return trip from the campus via nearby villages.

"So, tell me. What did you think of my Dad?" Neha said as if she expected me to jump in excitement.

"Don't really know him, but pretty strict I think. How do you live with him?"

"You know he is really impressed by good students. I hope you are going to do well in his course."

"I am trying. But I have never got an A. And he gives like a dozen assignments a week. Plus there is a viva component that I hate."

"If you do get an A, I'll probably tell him that we are friends."

"Well, I am trying. Anyway, where are we walking to?"

"Just keep walking, I have a place in mind."

I kept silent, hoping she had thought of a secluded place. That is all one wants when one is dating, an empty place with nothing to do, no one around. Yet, you see dozens of fast-food places, cinemas, and ice-cream parlours, all targeting the dating crowd. Why don't they just make rows and rows of empty rooms instead?

Neha took me through a mud-path that led to Katwaria village. A few semi-naked kids looked at us curiously as if we were a different species. Two buffaloes loose from their sheds were also taking an evening walk, and one seemed to follow us.

"Are you sure you know where we are going?" I asked doubtfully.

"Of course, I am. See that temple at the end of this path, over there."

I squinted my eyes. There was a temple flag, around a kilometre away. After a while, the buffalo following us gave up on the idea, and the two of us were alone.

We reached the temple and sat down at the parapet of the neglected steps. A stray snoozing dog opened an eye to look at us. In front of the temple was a railway line. I guessed it was for the Delhi ring railway, the local city train that no one really used and ran only once every couple of hours.

"What is this temple doing in the middle of nowhere?" I said, casually picking up her hand. The dog didn't care, and no one else was really around.

"I think only some villagers use it on special days. But I like it here," Neha said, leaning against me.

We kissed, I don't really know who started it. That is the cool thing about having a steady girlfriend. You don't have to struggle every time you want to kiss. But that was the farthest you could go with Neha. I put my hand on her shoulder for support. Then in a completely planned but seemingly unintentional manner I let it slip down toward her chest. Maybe this time her reflexes wouldn't be as strong.

"No!" Neha said the moment it got interesting. She pushed me away and sat up.

"You are so beautiful," I said, trying to be as mellow as possible.

"Shut up," she said and giggled, "your corny lines aren't going to get you anywhere. Have some shame, we are near a temple."

Yeah right, I thought. As if kissing next to a temple was okay, but somehow the classic 'slide the hand carelessly down' was not. Neha, I tell you, is the queen of contradictions.

I tried to get close to her again, it was useless to argue.

"Just kisses. You know this is wrong," she warned.

We did our making out, or rather me-trying-to-make-out routine for half an hour, after which she had to go home or something. We stood up, threw the dog a last glance and started walking back.

"Do you know my brother died on those tracks?" she said.

I hadn't really heard much about how her brother died. Gory stories kind of just put me off but I guess guys have to listen to their girlfriends. "Really? No, I didn't know. How did it happen?"

"I still remember the date, May 11. Bhaiyya had gone for a jog. We got the call mid-morning. I mean, Dad got the call. He told us only in the evening and I ...wasn't even allowed to go see the body." Her voice began to quiver.

We were nearing the village, so I wasn't sure if I should let her cry on my shoulder. But she herself chose to, and I couldn't do much.

"Neha, it's okay," I said, conscious of two urchins staring at us. The only time they had probably seen a guy and a girl embrace was on screen.

She only moved away from me when the number of kids watching us had gone up to eight.

"Wow, now where did they come from?" She wiped her eyes. The eight kids, mostly naked, looked at us intently as if they were watching a film.

"See, she is a heroine," I said to the kids.

"Raveena Tandon," said a three-year old in the crowd.

Neha started to laugh, much to my relief, given her moods tended to be long.

We walked further, until we came close enough to campus where we adopted separate paths.

"Perhaps I can introduce you as his course topper to him some day." She winked, walking ahead.

I waited the prescribed five minutes and then headed for campus. Was I in love with her? I kicked a pebble out of my way; if only she wouldn't be so good all the time!