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Vodka

ALOK RETURNED HYPER-HARRIED FROM HOME.

"How are your dad and mom?" I asked, alerted by his unusual silence at Sasi's, not even asking what the daily specials were.

"Miserable as usual. There was another big drama at home last weekend. There's yet another suitable match for my sister but we can't cough up the suitable money. Hence, either we say no or sign IOUs, meaning give it later when I pass out of the insti, get a job and then pay for it."

"That's tough," Ryan noted, who had just joined us after waking up from his royal siesta.

"But it is my duty man and I love them. I don't see it as trouble," Alok said dully.

"So what job are you going to take up?" I said.

"Whichever pays the most, I don't care," Alok said.

"That is crap. Don't you want to do something you really like?"

"I like money," Alok said as he finished his food. Until he had the money, paranthas would do.

We were mid-way through the semester now, and every now and then I would start thinking about my goal – to do well in Indem. By third year, every IITian knows his place. We were now five-pointers frozen in our place; we had modest expectations, and our grades never disappointed us. However, in Indem I wanted an A, something that had never been on my grade sheet. Alok warned me about my lofty ambition. "Cherian will chew you alive man. You hardly sleep these days. You know he gives only two or three As, right?"

"I do. But I have to give it my best. It is not just a stupid grade, but Neha at stake."

"How much have you scored so far in the assignments?"

"Thirty-three out of forty. Worked like a dog on all of them."

"Yes right. You need eighty total to get an A."

"I know, out of that the viva is ten, and the major is fifty."

"So unless you get almost a full score in the majors, you have to do decently in the vivas."

"I know. So this time, I have to pull it through," I said, abjectly nervous at the thought.

"Just relax man, a B won't be that bad."

"An A Alok, I want an A."

"Fine then. All the best," Alok said as Sasi delivered more paranthas.

"How is your girl?" Ryan said.

"Neha is fine. Just took me to the place where her brother met with the accident. Isn't that weird?" I said.

"Maybe because you are special. And the place holds special meaning for her," Alok shrugged.

"Fatso is right. She likes you man," Ryan said. "When did her brother die anyway?"

"Around three years ago. May 11 to be precise. He had gone jogging when they got a call mid-morning, hit by a ring railway train."

"Wow, that is incredible," Alok said, "and I thought no one used the ring railway."

"He wasn't using it Fatso. He just got hit by it," Ryan clarified.

"Yes, pretty gory." I rolled my eyes.

"Though who goes jogging on a bloody hot May morning?" Ryan wanted to know.

"Shut up man. The guy is dead, and you are making fun of him," I protested.

"No. That is not what I mean. I mean, hey Fatso, what time does the first ring railway train run?"

"I don't know," Alok said, busy eating his paranthas and somewhat pissed at the frequent reference to him as Fatso.

"I know, ten I think. Why?" I said.

"Well, think about it, ten in the morning in May. I think it is close to forty degrees and crap hot. Who goes jogging on a May morning?"

"Well, he did. Otherwise he wouldn't have died, right?" Alok said, obviously irritated. He never went jogging, so I guess he didn't know better.

"I know he died. But my point is..." Ryan said, "anyway, forget it."

"What? I want to know," I said.

"My point is, was it an accident at all."

I woke up with a headache on the day of Cherian's viva. There were a couple of weeks left until the majors, but today would seal my Indem fate. "Try to sleep, try to sleep," I had told myself about a million times the night before, all to no use.

"God, you look a mess," Ryan greeted in the toilet as we were shaving together.

"Couldn't sleep much. Hell, I know I am going to screw this one up," I said and slapped water on my face.

Ryan pressed the nozzle of his Gillette shaving gel and prepared his twin-blade sensor razor. His parents had sent him all these contraptions to look even better as if the guy needed to improve his looks. Why couldn't he get a few pimples now and again like say Alok?

"Listen Hari," Ryan said making clean strokes across his cheek, "you have busted your ass for this course already. You mess this up, and there is no hope for you man. You probably know the answers better than anyone else."

"Since when has knowing the answers been a problem? And this is Cherian, even normal guys get scared," I said.

"See, I am not even going for his viva. But if you are so scared, I have an idea."

"You aren't coming? Ryan, it is ten percent. And Cherian will go ape-shit if a student doesn't even come to the viva."

"I have vowed not to view that bastard's face as much as I can. And who cares about ten percent, I don't have to impress the dad."

"Up to you. I still think you should come. Anyway, what is your idea?"

"I don't know if it will work."

"Just tell me man. I am desperate," I said.

Ryan wiped his face with a towel. He opened a bottle of some fancy overpriced American aftershave and splashed it liberally on his cheeks.

"Vodka: the solution to all problems."

"What? Vodka? I am talking about a viva Ryan, I am not organizing a party."

"I know. But you know how vodka makes one less inhibited and makes you talk more? Who knows, a couple of swigs and it may work for you."

"You are crazy. The viva is at eleven in the morning. It is hardly the time to drink..."

"If you get a zero in his viva, you think Neha will ever introduce you to daddy?"

The image of a zero and a B or C in Indem flashed across my mind. "How much?"

"Just a couple of shots. Come, I have some in my closet."

I went to Ryan's room where amidst branded clothes he hid his stash of alcohol. Alongside the bottle were envelopes, all with US stamps.

Ryan poured vodka in a steel glass, making it a third-full.

"What are those envelopes?" I said.

"Nothing. Here, one shot...one, two, three," Ryan said.

I couldn't believe the envelopes were unimportant. I mean, there were like a hundred of them literally.

"Letters from your parents, aren't they?" I hazarded a guess.

"Yeah. Here have another one," Ryan said.

"You sure this won't be too much?" I said.

"No. In fact have a third one just to be sure. Here, I'll accompany you."

With that, Ryan joined me in my third shot. The vodka went down like a fireball, hitting my empty stomach, spearing my intestines.

"All right then, off I go to meet the daddy," I said cheerfully.

"All the best, Hari. And listen, just don't tell Alok about the envelopes."

"Tell what?" I said. I hardly knew anything about them and I wouldn't have if Ryan hadn't mentioned it.

"Nothing, just don't mention it. They write every week, and send a cheque once a month. I never reply, that is all."

"Why don't you reply?" I asked, basking in the spirit inside of me.

"Cause I hate them. Actually, I don't care about them. I mean, neither do they about me. So why pretend?" Ryan said.

"Ryan, you know this whole big deal you make about not caring about your parents?" the vodka spoke for me.

"Yeah, what about that?"

"I don't think it is true. I mean, how can it be true?" I said, ignoring his hostile stance. I kind of meant it. With all the Gillette and aftershaves they sent, how could he not love them?

"It's true. You are a kid in life man, just go give your viva," Ryan said and lit up a cigarette. Smoke made the man more profound.

"I am going. But if it were true, why would you keep all the letters?" I asked, beating a retreat.

Cherian was already in class. My turn came in ten minutes and I sat next to Alok.

"Where is Ryan?" he whispered, flipping through his notes. Alok always revises until the last minute.

"He is skipping it," I said.

"What? He is crazy man," he shook his head.

"Says he doesn't care. Just as he doesn't for his parents," I said, obviously the second phrase came because of the vodka.

"Are you okay, Hari? You sound kind of garbled. And what is that smell...wait have you been drinking?"

"Shh...keep quiet. Just a little bit. Ryan said it helps relax."

"Ryan, Ryan, Ryan. Do you ever think for yourself?" Alok said.

"Hari," Prof Cherian called my name even before I could answer Alok. My moment was here. My first A was to be decided in the next five minutes.

"So, what is the Japanese system for manufacturing that lowers inventories?" Prof Cherian started as usual without any greetings or pleasantries. Just a straight firm voice like from a machine.

"Good morning, sir," I said.

"Good morning, Hari. Now answer my question." His eyes looked like big, bulging versions of Neha's eyes.

"Good morning, sir," I said again, to kick-start my brain.

"That is fine, Hari. Now answer please, if you don't mind."

"Sir, the Japanese inventory lowering system..." I began.

"Yes, that one. You know the answer or not?" Prof Cherian said, his voice getting louder.

"I sir....I sir..." I said.

"It is JIT or Just in Time. Cannot believe students today

cannot answer such simple questions. Next one, what is the difference between assembly line and batch manufacturing?"

"Sir, very simple question sir...hic," I said.

"Why are you talking like that? And what is this smell? Are you drunk Mr Hari? Are you drunk in my class?"

"No sir, sir, I actually know answer, sir," I reiterated desperately.

"You are actually drunk. The guts of these students today!" Prof Cherian said and threw a piece of chalk right at me. It hit me on the chest and hurt a little. Even though I was drunk, I knew something was going wrong. I was actually speaking at this viva, but not making any sense.

"Sir," I said.

"Get out of my class now. Get out now." Prof Cherian's face turned red and he slammed his files on the desk.

I picked up my notebook to leave when Cherian came toward me. He took out a red pen and marked a circle on my sheet. Then he made another circle over it.

"Zero, that is what you deserve. I wish I could give you negative," he said, "and you better do well in your majors for I am not going to let you get away from this that easy."

I kept quiet. All those shots for a zero, which I could have earned myself anyway with or without vodka.

"Fuck!" Ryan slammed a fist against his palm when he heard the story back in Kumaon.

"What fuck? Who told you to suggest such a weird idea?" Alok said.

"I thought it would work but the shots were too big," Ryan said. He was playing with a basketball, bouncing it back and forth on the wall.

"Will you cut out that noise?" Alok said, "So what are you going to do now Hari?"

"Do what? I lose the A for sure. And Cherian thinks I'm a drunkard. Way to go for his daughter's boyfriend," I said, covering my face with my hands.

Thump, thump, thump. Ryan kept silent as the only noise he made was with the ball.

"Stop it," Alok said, grabbing the ball from Ryan, "say something solid now!"

"Alok!" someone shouted from outside. It was the security guard downstairs.

"Phone call for Alok," the guard shouted.

"Must be from home," Alok said, "Come Hari, no point discussing Indem now."

I came down with Alok if for nothing else but to be distracted from the Indem fiasco.

"Hello, Mummy. How are you? Yes, I know I have not come home for a long time," Alok said on the phone.

"What? Didi got engaged? Oh, you mean the boy's side have agreed," Alok said, his voice excited.

"Yes, I am really happy, how is Dad...I know...of course I'll pay for everything once I get a job Mom...yes, you are taking a loan for gifts..."

I could hear only half the conversation, but could pretty much figure out what was going on. Alok's parents had finally managed to palm off their daughter to someone. As he explained later, the groom's family wanted a Maruti car in dowry, but had agreed to defer it until Alok passed out and started working. That's when the marriage would take place but at least they had a deal.

"Congratulations, your sister is getting married. Is your family excited? Or like sad or something since she'll go away?" I said to Alok after the call.

"They are relieved more than anything I think. I just hope I get a job that pays for this damn affair. Apart from the car, there will be a function as well."

"Why don't you guys marry her off later? What is the big hurry?"

"The older she gets, the more dowry people will demand. Waiting will mean more expense later. I'm happy the deal is cut."

It sounded like credit card debt. If you don't get rid of it now, it will cost you a lot more later. The relief was understandable.

"What does the groom do?" I said.

"Oh. I don't know. I forgot to ask," Alok said.

Several weeks later, we were in the Kumaon mess eating dinner. It was Thursday I guess, for that is when Kumaon had 'continental' dinner. In reality, it was just an excuse for mess-workers to not give us real food. The menu sounded nice – noodles, French fries, toast and soup. It tasted awful. The cooks made the noodles in superglue or something – they stuck to each other as one composite mass in the huge serving pan. The French fries were cold and either extremely undercooked or burnt to taste like coal. The cream of mushroom soup could have been mistaken for muddy water, only it was warmer and saltier.

"This is bad man," Alok said as his noodles refused to vacate his fork, "I told you let's go out."

"I didn't know it would be so bad. And the semester is almost over. I am totally out of cash."

"That is right actually," Alok said, "better start studying for the majors. Less than ten days now."

"Yes, not that I care now. After Indem messed up, I don't really care beyond passing each course."

"Ryan, I think you should focus on Indem. Cherian didn't like you missing the viva. He smirks when he mentions your name in class attendance."

"I know," Ryan said, dropping his half-eaten French fry in disgust, "I got sixteen out of forty in quizzes and zero in viva. Need twenty-four out of fifty in majors to pass it."

"Not that easy," I pointed out the obvious.

"Worse case, I flunk. So what?" Ryan said and tried the soup. Without caring for etiquette, he spewed the contents out from his mouth back into the bowl.

"Cherian will make you do it again, it's a core course," Alok said. "Like drinking the soup you just spat out."

"Fuck," Ryan said. I wasn't sure if his comment was aimed at the food or the prospect of repeating Cherian's course.

"Man, if only I had an A, I could finally get Neha..." I said.

"I think we can still do something," Ryan said.

"What? Drink enough to forget Neha?" I mocked.

"No. If you completely crack the majors, you can still make it, right?"

"I have thirty-three on forty, need eighty for an A. Major is fifty points. How am I going to get forty-seven on fifty?"

"No way man. Ryan, don't trouble the guy more. It is over."

"It is not over, my friends, it never is. If I tell you that you can get a perfect score in majors, will you believe me?"

"Don't be crazy. I'd have to spend twenty hours a day on Indem and will probably not make it. Cherian's major test will be full of surprise questions. I am screwed..." I lamented.

"What if you knew the questions?" Ryan said.

"What if, what if? Ryan, are you dreaming?" Alok said.

"No I am not dreaming, Fatso. I am trying to help my friend. I think we can get the major paper."

"How?" I was arrested.

"By sneaking it out of Cherian's office," Ryan said.

Alok and I fell silent for a full minute, took us around that much time to digest the preposterousness of the idea, along with the unpalatable food.

"You mean steal it? Steal a bloody major paper from an IIT prof? Is that what you said?" Alok said.

"Don't make it sound so dramatic. It is not such a big..."

"Are you nuts? Tell me, are you nuts?" Alok said and walked out of the mess. I went out as well, preoccupied with my coming encounter with Neha, especially with how I could dismiss my past encounter with daddy dearest.