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Operation Pendulum

THE NEXT DAY AT KUMAON LAWNS RYAN WAS HIS LORDLY best. "Guys, just listen to me."

"No way, you can't do this. Please, stop this nonsense," Alok said.

"He has a point," I conceded, not fully sure of what it was though.

"Can you guys just listen to me for a minute? You don't have to do anything," Ryan said, sounding almost reasonable.

"Sure," I said.

"We have lived in this place for three years, right? And what have we got?" Ryan said.

"Oh, don't start about the system being crappy, Ryan. Just come to the point," Alok said.

"I will, I will," he said, realizing that he didn't exactly have a patient audience in hand. He took out a sheet from his

pocket — two A4 sized sheets stuck together — and laid it out on the grass. Employing two pebbles as paperweight, he began with a flourish, "This, gentlemen is a map of the insti building. All profs get the major papers ready and printed a week prior to tests but our Cherian's a paragon, so his must be ready even earlier. Here, Cherian's office is on the sixth floor. The roof is on the ninth floor..."

Ryan's face was intense like Alok's while writing his exam paper. This was not a casual conversation; he had pondered over this for a while.

"I told you the whole idea was crap. How can you force these details on us as if we've said yes," Alok said.

But that is how Ryan is, he decides, and then he proposes, and then he does whatever he wants to anyway.

"Ryan, what is all this man?" I said.

"Just listen to me. Hari, I could get you the A grade you want here. Imagine, your girl will finally not be ashamed to acknowledge you. And you too Fatso, an A won't look so bad on your grade sheet when you apply for jobs either."

"But it is so warped, so...so wrong," Alok protested, looking at me for support against Ryan's latest madness. But I was already thinking of walking hand in hand with Neha in the insti gardens when the moon was out. Could I really get an A?

"It is wrong only if you get caught right?"

It was kind of hard to argue with Ryan's logic, especially if you were dreaming about your beautiful girlfriend at that time. Yes, it is a crime only if someone catches you. Otherwise, it is just a neat plan.

"But..." Alok tried again.

"Anyway, let me finish," Ryan said, without letting Alok finish now that I looked half way there.

"The roof is on the ninth floor. So, if I suspend myself with ropes and then sail down to Cherian's window, I can get to his room. You guys can help me, just like we got Hari into Neha's room."

"Are you crazy? Neha's room was easy, no ropes or anything. And the insti building is nine floors high," I said.

"I am not scared. I have done rock climbing in school," Ryan said.

"What if the window is not open?" Alok said.

I could see Ryan liked Alok's question. Not only because Ryan had thought about it before, but because it meant Alok was buying into this. But wait a minute, was I on board with this just because it was Ryan? An A would be nice though.

"Yes, what about the window?" I said.

"The insti windows have latches that are weaker than rubber bands. They are the same windows as in Kumaon hostel. One bang on the back and it opens."

"Still, you will suspend yourself from the roof?" I said.

"I said I wasn't scared."

"What if someone sees us?" I said.

That is the thing about Ryan. He is brilliant, but also fearless. This machismo might lead to an over-confidence that could kill the plan.

"No one will see us," Ryan said.

"Yeah right. Just three guys hanging on to the insti roof as usual. Institute security wouldn't care, eh?" Alok smirked.

"Fatso, it will be super dark," Ryan said.

"But we could make a noise, or the movement could be seen by the security jeeps on the roads. Remember, we are not on the roof, but hanging by the sides. We just might be seen."

"C'mon guys..." Ryan said, looking bored.

"Too risky. Forget it," Alok said, tearing blades of grass. I had to nod, too. Besides, just the thought of Ryan bungee-jumping upward made me sweat.

"Well, you got any better ideas?" Ryan said, irritated.

"What were you planning to do next anyway?" My curiosity got the better of me.

"Okay, here are the next steps," Ryan pointed to the side of the paper. "One, switch on light on the opposite right wall. Two, scan the room for a sealed brown bag. Three, open the seal with a knife, and take out one copy of major paper. Four, using a candle and fresh seal, fasten the bag back. Five, get the hell out of there."

"Sounds simple enough after that," Alok said, "but I guess we can't get in. Let's go now, I'm hungry."

"There could be a way," I said.

"What?"

"Through the door. His main regular office door," I said.

"How? Break the lock? Of course, you know that is impossible, with the noise and everything. And he'll know the next day," Ryan said.

"No lock breaking. Just get in elegantly with the key," I said.

"Key? Where the hell will you get the key?" Alok said.

"From Neha's car keys. Her dad's office keys are in the bunch," I said.

Everyone fell silent for five seconds. It was the silence of admiration for sheer brilliance.

"Wow. I guess you just have to steal the keys then," Alok said.

"Why not just sneak them out for half an hour and make a duplicate?" Ryan said.

"I guess. Not the easiest thing to do, but can be done," I said, and smiled smugly at my own genius. Cherian's office was an open door.

"Hari, you are a killer man. That is awesome," Ryan said.

He finalized the revised plan again. It seemed simple enough now, and we had invested too much time in it to walk away from it.

"So we go up at night, just as we go to the roof for the vodka. But we stop at the sixth floor and raid Cherian's office," Ryan said.

"Not raid, just turn the key and slide in," I said, impersonating a mock key with my fingers.

"Yes, up yours Cherian," Ryan poked air with his middle finger. We all laughed and shook hands.

"Let us give this operation a name. Something sexy, something unsuspecting and simple."

"Something that will swing our miserable fortunes in this place," I said.

"Yes, this swinging operation can be called Operation Pendulum," Ryan said.

And on that bright lawn with our sun-lit eyes, we blithely cheered in unison, "Operation Pendulum!"

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The Longest Day of My Life I

THEY SAY NO ONE DAY CAN BE TOO SIGNIFICANT IN YOUR life, but I tell you the day of Operation Pendulum was the most memorable and longest of all my IIT days. Each moment, each event is vivid and fresh in my mind as if it happened yesterday. It was the day that changed our lives, or at least changed us.

There was no formal date set for Operation Pendulum. It was kind of like, we'd do it the day I got the key thing done. The majors were less than a week away, so we were sure Cherian would have the papers by now. And of course, we'd need some time to figure out the answers to those questions. So the sooner the better.