

"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.

April 11, the day of Operation Pendulum, a day that started with my date with Neha. I should have seen the signs the moment Neha told me she'd sprained her ankle.

"What?" I said over the phone, "I am dying to meet you. Don't cancel today. The majors will begin after that."

"But Hari, I can't even walk ten steps. Please, can't we do it some other time?"

"Can I just see you for half an hour. How about I come home?"

I knew Neha's mom would not be at home that day. It was the eleventh, the day she went to that temple by the tracks and sobbed for her son. That is why Neha had agreed to the date in the first place.

"Home? Are you mad? What if someone sees you?"

"Third year is ending, can you stop being so scared?"

"But..."

"And what if I get an A, you'll introduce me then anyway right?"

"Okay, but only for half an hour. And come exactly at 11.30, so I'll leave the doors open," she said.

"Great. I'll see you then," I said, keeping the phone down with a sigh of relief. I just had to see her that day, or rather see her car.

"Everything okay?" Ryan quizzed as I left Kumaon.

"Of course. See you in two hours," I said.

"Shh, quiet, just come in quickly," Neha said, whispering quite unnecessarily.

"No one is here," I said.

"You're crazy. So, why the big urge to see me today?" Neha said, leading me to her room.

"Well, you know third year is ending and majors and everything," I said, my eyes roving around the room to spot any key-racks.

"So?" Neha said.

"So I thought meeting you would be good luck for the exams," I said sitting down on the bed by her side.

"Wow, how romantic!" she said, "and I thought my loafer was pining for me and dying for me and whatever..."

"Oh, I was," I said and leaned forward to hug her. It was true. I was always pining for her. She looked beautiful. Even with her sore ankle, all pink and wrapped in a crepe bandage, she managed to look beautiful.

"Ouch, careful," she said, pushing me back on the bed, "I know what you pine for."

"What?"

"My body, not me," she said, nose up in air.

What is the difference? I thought. You just cannot understand girls sometimes.

"That is not true," I said, just guessing that it would be the right response.

"Come here," she called me and kissed me.

"When does Mom get back?"

"In two hours. You know, Samir Bhaiyya's date."

"I know, it's the eleventh. You know Neha, I wanted to ask you about that."

"What about it?"

"I was talking about it to Ryan..."

"You talked about Samir to Ryan?"

"No, just discussing how he well, died. You know the jogging and everything."

"So?"

"So Ryan made a point. A good point."

"What was that?"

"That who goes jogging on a hot May morning?"

She fell silent, released me from her hug and sat away.

"Neha?" I prompted.

"Hari," she said and sobbed, "Hari, I didn't want to tell you this, but I have to."

"What?"

"Wait," she said and went to open her cupboard. A bright mélange of clothes appeared, quite unlike an average Kumaon guy's closet. Neha took out a folded piece of paper. "Read this," she said.

I opened the page and my eyebrows jumped up in shock, it was signed Samir.

Dear Neha,

I love you my little sister, as much as the day I first held you in my arms when you were born. I was so proud that day, and will remain so forever.

Neha, can you keep a secret? By the time you get this, I may not be in this world. But you must understand that no one in the world must know of this letter.

I have tried three times to get into IIT, and each time I have disappointed Dad. He cannot get over the fact that his son cannot handle physics, chemistry and maths. I cannot do it Neha, no matter how hard I try, no matter how many years

I study or how many books I read. I cannot get into IIT. And I cannot bear to see Dad's eyes.

He has seen thousands of IIT students in his life, and cannot see why his own son cannot make it. Well Neha, he sees the students who make it, but he doesn't see the hundreds of thousands who don't make it. He has not spoken to me for two months. He doesn't even talk to mom properly because of me. What can I do? Keep trying until I die? Or simply die?

If anyone finds out that I took my own life, Mom would probably not be able to survive. But I had to tell someone – and who else but you. I love you Neha. And you tell them I went jogging.

Yours in eternity,

Samir

"What the heck is this," I said, feeling creepy. It is not every day that you hold a suicide note in your hand.

"It's true. I should have never told you. But I'm so close to you and you start all this investigation thing and..." She burst into tears.

"Listen, now calm down," I said, speaking more to myself than to her. She stopped crying after five minutes and I gave her a glass of water.

"You want to know what happened in my viva?" Maybe it would make her laugh. "Ryan made me have vodka shots," I said.

Neha lifted her head up and squeaked, "That was you? Dad mentioned it. That was you?" She started hitting me with a pillow. She was laughing again. She looked beautiful, and I

could have sat there admiring her beauty forever but I was on a mission today, to get the keys for Operation Pendulum.

"Stop, that hurts," I said, moving toward her on the bed.

"Don't come near me, you drunk loafer. You know Dad brooded for two hours that day." She was laughing so hard, she had to press her stomach with a hand.

I curled up next to her and held her. She turned her face towards me, almost in reflex. We kissed, and then we kissed again. Then she held my hand and did something that she had never done before; she put it on her breast.

Wow, my head went into a tizzy. What happened to this girl? Had she lost her mind? I certainly lost mine and forgot about Operation Pendulum.

My hand slid under her T-shirt and then clumsily under The Bra. Life would be so much better without hooks.

"Easy Tiger easy," she said. I liked it that she called me Tiger.

She sat up to remove her T-shirt. And then the rest. I sat there transfixed, trying hard not to let my tongue hang loose and pant like a dog.

"Well Tiger, are you going to remove anything or not?" she said.

"I..I..." I said as she pulled me close.

Half an hour later, we lay on the bed, spent but completely content. I looked up at the old ceiling fan in Neha's room, going around in awkward circles and felt dizzy with happiness.

"So?" Neha said.

"So what," I said, regaining my equilibrium.

"Say something."

I was bloody beyond happy. If I did not have that key to steal, I would have stayed put forever.

"That was quite...amazing," I said in an understatement.

"Thanks. I liked it too. I guess I am a bad girl now," she said.

"No, you are not," I said, scared she might regret this and never do it again.

"Yeah, right. Here I am, lying naked with a man who was drunk in his viva, while my Dad is less than a kilometer away in his office," she said and laughed, "It's so liberating."

"Really?"

"Yes, so liberating, yet so sad," she said.

"Relax, Neha," I said, fearing an inexplicable round of tears. "Do you want to go out?"

"No. Why, don't you like it here?"

"I do. Just wanted a cigarette," I said.

"Oh yes, I have heard cigarettes are great after sex. Please get me one too," she said.

"You don't smoke!"

"I don't sleep with guys either. Hurry, get me a fag please."

I saw the opportunity, and jumped at it. "Can I take your car?"

"Why? You didn't get Ryan's scooter?"

"No, he wanted it for squash. Can I?"

"Okay, the keys are on top of the fridge. Be quick though," she said as she got up and picked up my shirt.

"Hey, that's my shirt you're wearing," I pointed out.

"I know. I like it, it is so loose and perfect for a little nap," she said and pretended to fall asleep.

"Neha. Don't be ridiculous, how am I supposed to go out?"

"Wear my top," she said lazily.

"It's pink, and all tight. Are you nuts?"

"Just take one of Dad's shirts in the closet downstairs."

"Neha, don't be silly..."

"Get lost and get the fags Hari, you have tired me out," she said and threw a pillow at me.

Thinking if I could take Prof Cherian's car and daughter, I could totally take his shirt, I took out a white shirt from his closet, plain apart from the DC monogrammed on the sleeve.

I picked up the bunch of keys from the fridge. Six of them, one surely for Cherian's office.

"Yes!" I said to myself as I left the house.

I drove out on the empty road, as the mid-day sun had forced most people indoors, drove to Jia Sarai and went straight to the duplicate key shop.

"Which one?" the shopkeeper said.

"All six," I said.

As the shopkeeper carved the new keys, I bought a pack of cigarettes. This was simpler than I thought. I lit one and drifted into thoughts of hugging Neha again. This had to be the most wonderful day of my life.

The keys were ready soon. I put the new bunch in my pocket and drove back into campus through the insti gates.

Just as I turned toward faculty housing, I saw a bicycle ahead of me. I am mad, I am stupid, a freaking jerk I thought as I honked – and turning around to look at me was Cherian.

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The Longest Day of My Life II

THERE ARE TIMES IN YOUR LIFE WHEN YOU ARE SO SCARED you scream, and there are times you are so beyond scared you just freeze. I mean you kind of get fossilized in an icebox and never come back to life ever again. When Cherian got off his bicycle and walked toward me, or rather his car, I went into deep freeze.

He came and stood next to me. I should have probably got out, but I was crap scared to move an inch. I heard my heart, which was louder than Cherian's words. "This is my car," he said.

True, I thought, ten out of ten. I can control this, I said to myself and tried to breathe. "Yes, sir," I said.

"Who are you? And what are you doing in my car?" he asked next.