

"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.

"Sir, just driving back...sir," I said, probably looking as stupid as I sounded.

Cherian parked his bicycle on the side of the road and abandoning my role as a wax model, I got out of the car. Oh, where were the dinosaurs when you needed them?

"Were you driving to my home?" Cherian said, opening the front door. Yes, he was going to drive now. Could I go home?

"Yes, sir."

Suddenly his mighty brow furrowed. "I know you. You are a student, right? What is your name?"

"Hari, Sir," I said, glad he had asked the only thing I was sure about.

"You are the one who was playing tricks in my viva?"

I nodded, guilty as charged.

"Get in," Cherian said.

I quietly opened the other front door and sat next to him. He started the car.

"Who gave you the keys?"

I jumped at the last word. My hand caressed my trouser pocket from the outside. Yes, the set of duplicate keys was still there. I had to think of something now. Any reason why I could be driving his car apart from buying post-coitus cigarettes for his daughter.

"Neha, sir," I said after a deliberate pause.

"You know Neha?" the professor's eyebrows shot up.

"Sir, I met her on the road. The car had a flat tire."

"So?" Cherian said.

"Sir, I was passing by and offered to push the car to the mechanic. She had to go back and I offered to bring the car home."

Silence from Cherian. Had he fallen for it? I guessed he had, for he started the car and started driving it slowly.

"Why did you offer that?"

"Just wanted to help," I shrugged modestly like I go about scouting for good deeds all day.

"And you don't have classes to attend?"

"A free period, sir."

"Silly girl," Cherian spoke aloud to himself, "Gives the car to any stupid stranger. I have to talk to her about this."

I kept silent; a new thought had crossed my mind; if Neha would be dressed. The last thing I wanted right now was a surprise hug from her when she opened the door. If only I could get ten seconds before she spoke to Cherian. Or if only I could disappear.

Cherian parked the car at his house.

"Sir, can I go now?"

"No, come in. This stupid girl should at least thank you. Not that I'd ever let boys like you come near my house."

"Right, sir." I totally understood him.

Cherian pressed the doorbell. Neha opened the door wearing just a bed sheet.

"Have you..." Then she saw her father. "Dad," Neha said, blinking her eyes and adjusting her bed sheet to cover the maximum. Surely, this was one hell of a kick compared to cigarettes.

"Your keys, ma'am," I spoke quickly, "Don't worry, I got the puncture completely fixed and brought your car back."

"Huh?" she looked at me.

"Neha, are you out of your mind? Why aren't you dressed?" Cherian said, controlling the volume of his voice only because I was there.

Neha blinked again before disappearing into her bedroom, presumably to change.

"This daughter of mine is mad. Sit down," Cherian said.

"Sir, we pushed the car for twenty minutes. She must be tired," I said. Well, sex was like pushing a car sometimes, only a lot more pleasant.

Neha came back wearing a very daddy's-good-girl salwar-kameez and holding a tray with two glasses of water.

As Cherian drank his glass, I repeated, "I was just telling your dad how your car got a flat tire and I helped you take it to the mechanic and then brought it back. I met Sir on the way here you see."

"Oh?" Neha said, striving for an intelligent facial expression.

"How can you dump the car on a stranger?" Cherian asked her.

"Sorry Dad," Neha said and collapsed on the sofa.

"Sir, can I go now?" I said.

Cherian gave half a nod and I was out of the house. I walked as fast as I could without running.

"Hari," Cherian shouted when I was at the gate.

I froze and turned. "Yes, sir."

"You are not that smart, you know," he said.

I'd always known of Cherian's disdain for students with low grades. I didn't know he'd be so direct about it.

"Sir, I know sir. I will study harder."

"That is not what I meant."

"Sir?"

"I was a student once too you know. And the best one, a straight 10 all four years."

"I know Sir."

"And if you think you can mess with my daughter and get away with it, you are wrong."

I stood silent.

"You drink in my viva, and now I find you fooling with my daughter, in my car and wearing my shirt," Cherian said and tugged at my collar. "You watch it Hari, you watch it. This is IIT, not some bloody regional college. First the viva, and then my daughter. My daughter!"

"Sir, it is not what you think."

"Don't tell me what to think. I knew my daughter was distracted these days. God, and because of scum like you! You stay away from my home and my daughter. Just away, understand?"

"Yes, Sir," I said, wishing Cherian would let go of my collar. I was beginning to go limp. I mean being caught by him on top of losing my virginity was hardly conducive to strengthening me.

"Good. I don't want people talking, so I won't bring this up again. But you stay away from her and focus on your courses. For, Hari, one slip in the insti and I will ruin you. I will bloody ruin you," Cherian said, his face an unpleasant red.

"Sir, I will stay away. Just let me go," I pleaded.

He released my collar, his fingers still trembling. I ran out of his gate and toward Kumaon. It was the fastest jog of life. I stopped only once, when I passed Cherian's bicycle. I don't know what struck me. I turned to make sure no one was around, and then released the air from both the tires. Damn, that monster deserved some revenge. And that just might make the bastard believe there are flat tires in this world.

"No way man," I said, panting as I reached Ryan's room.

"No way what? Did you get the keys?" Ryan said.

I tried to catch my breath.

"What happened?" Alok asked as he came to Ryan's room.

"Hell. Hell happened." I regained my pulse and related the whole story.

Ryan started laughing. Even though he is bold and everything, that is not what I expected from him. Cherian was there, holding my bloody collar and threatening to ruin me.

"Fuck Ryan, this is not funny," I said.

"Oh really," he said, laughing even harder, "then what is it? Cherian's shirt, Neha in a bedsheet. The prof must have gone psycho," Ryan paused to laugh some more. "I wish I was there."

"Shut up. This is added tension man," Alok said.

"What tension? You got the keys right?" Ryan said.

I nodded as I took out the bunch.

"So we're still doing this?" I said.

"Why not? How does Cherian know about this?" Ryan said and dangled the keys in front of him like a tempting bunch of ripe grapes.

"I don't know. I'm scared Ryan. I really am."

"Just relax dude. You are in shock, sex and horror on the same day," Ryan said, laughing again.

"Hari is right. We should re-evaluate Operation Pendulum."

"Nonsense," Ryan said and became serious again, "if at all, it makes the case stronger. Hari's only hope is if he cracks the majors. He can then still make Cherian feel that he is not such a loser after all."

"Thanks Ryan," I said.

"Oh come on Hari. You had a few hitches today, but still managed fine. Let Cherian think what he wants."

"Wonder what he will do to Neha," I said.

"You can't do anything about that, can you? And not today at least. Let's get the major paper and then worry about other stuff."

"You should talk to Neha after a few days only. Don't worry, Cherian will try and bury it. He wouldn't want the world to know. And he doesn't look like the dad who can talk to his daughter about this sort of stuff," Alok said and put his arm on my shoulder.

"We are friends man. Just have to wait for the evening now. Remember co-operate to dominate," Ryan said and hi-fived both of us.

Two hours later, at exactly five p.m. Alok got a call from home. We were sitting in Ryan's room and playing cards.

"Alok! Urgent phone call!" the guard below shouted at the top of his voice. Alok threw back his set of three cards.

"What is it?" I said.

"I don't know. Maybe my sister's engagement date got fixed," he yelled as he ran down the stairs.

"Let's go down. If that is true, we can get Fatso to treat us," Ryan said as we followed Alok down to the booth.

"Yes Mom, yes, I am fine. What happened, you don't sound so good," Alok said.

Ryan and I looked at each other and shrugged our shoulders.

"Really? What? I mean how could they?" Alok said as his own face dropped. Ryan and I backed away from the booth. No treat this time.

"What happened to Dad? Mom, speak louder this line is not clear. What happened? Not eating anything? For how long?" Alok said as the line got disconnected. The phone had gone dead.

He sat down on the floor of the telephone booth. The flimsy wooden box shook with the weight. "Can you believe this?"

"What? The phone has been giving trouble all week," Ryan said.

"The boy's side cancelled the proposal," Alok said.

"Why?" I said.

"They wanted a portion of the dowry right now. To lock in the boy. Mom said she will apply for a loan but it will take a few months. Meanwhile, they get another deal and it is all over. Bloody idiots," Alok said.

"That sounds sick. Why would you want to marry your sister off to such a family anyway?" I said.

"I don't know. All boys-side families are the same. And Dad is upset and has not eaten anything since I don't know when. There is mayhem at home, and the bloody phone is dead."

"It is probably good the phone is dead. What could you have done? Get up now, let's go up and talk," Ryan said, giving Alok a hand.

We went upstairs and stayed quiet for a while. Ryan finally broke the silence.

"Six o'clock," he said like a don to fellow-gangsters, "four hours more. We leave Kumaon at ten for the operation."

I nodded my head, barely listening to him. I was wondering what Neha was doing right now.

"Ryan," Alok said, "I am really not comfortable right now..."

"About what?" Ryan said.

"I am getting nervous about this operation. First Hari runs into Cherian. Then Didi's proposal flops. And Dad might just fall sick again if he doesn't eat properly. I mean, we don't have to do this, do we?"

"Hey wait a minute now," Ryan said as he stood up, "what has your sister's proposal got to do with this? And your dad will be fine."

Alok remained silent with an unconvinced expression.

Ryan look at me and then back to Alok a couple of times. He paced around the room and started speaking again, "But tell me, is this the time to discuss all this? I thought we had made the decision. Look, we even have the keys."

He jingled the bunch in his hand.

"But Ryan, we don't need the risk now," Alok said.

"There is no risk. Just four hours, and we will have the paper. End of story."

"Hari, what do you think?" Alok said.

"Wait a minute," Ryan said, his voice louder. "Are you going to make him take sides again? Hari, does this Fatso want to do what he did after the first sem?"

"Relax Ryan," I said, interrupting my re-playing of the last moments with Neha, "why are you shouting?"

"Then tell Fatso to make up his mind," Ryan said and sat down. He lit up a cigarette and took a hurried puff.

"Of course I don't want to split, guys," Alok said.

"Or does he want to stay here and make us do the work? So he can get the paper for free?" Ryan said.

"See, that is what he thinks. He doesn't trust me," Alok said.

"Relax guys, I said, "I think all of us are getting tense here. We have four hours until the insti gets empty. We have the keys. We want the paper. If we do it, we do it together, right?"

"Right!" Ryan said.

We looked at Alok.

"Right" Alok said in a volume one-tenth that of Ryan.

"And we have thought through the risks right?" I said, looking at Ryan "Of course," he responded.

"Then let us just go for it. And Alok, your didi will find another match. If not now, maybe when you get a job and can pay for the wedding. What is the big hurry? Right?" I said looking at Alok.

"Right," Alok said, his voice sounding more confident and relaxed.

"Friends?" I said, looking at both of them.

"Of course," Ryan and Alok said in unison. "I'm in," Alok said.

"Good. Let's stay quiet for the next few hours," I said, wanting to dream about Neha.

We kept quiet for the next three hours. Alok said something about being worried about his dad. But we told him to relax, as his mom had handled such situations before. We did not go down to the mess to eat dinner. Somehow, we felt the crowds in the mess would read our minds.

"Ten o' clock," Ryan said and we jumped up as the clock struck the hour.

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The Longest Day of My Life III

WE WANTED TO LEAVE NO TRAIL OF OUR PRESENCE. FOR the first time in years, we walked to the insti instead of using Ryan's scooter. We walked quietly past the hostels, with books in hand as if going to the library for some midnight reading.

"So why did your parents start looking for your sister so early, how old is she?" I whispered, nervous as hell.

"Just twenty-three. I think they should look for a boy only when I start working. It would be much easier for me to get a loan," Alok said.

I agreed.

"If I get a job that is. Not much out there for a miserable five-pointer," he said.

"Well, maybe this A will lift you up a bit," I said.