

"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.

"Shh," Ryan said as we reached the insti building.

We were being overcautious, as we scanned every corner for insti security guards. They never hung around the lobby at this time, and we'd sneaked up the stairs dozens of times for our vodka sessions. But we still split up and looked around all sides of the building – there was no one.

Cherian's office was on the sixth floor. There was minimal lighting on the stairs, and we counted aloud as we finished each flight of stairs.

"...and six. That is it guys. We get out, and Cherian's office is seventh door on the right," Ryan said.

We stepped on to the sixth floor. There was only one small bulb lighting the entire corridor.

"D C Cherian, Head of the Department. Bloody pig," Ryan said as he read the nameplate outside Cherian's office. Alok crouched behind me as Ryan examined the lock.

"Keys," Ryan extended his left hand.

I took out my bunch of keys and they jingled as if on stereo.

"Keep it quiet," Alok said.

"Stop being so scared, Fatso. No one knows we're here." He was freaking me out. "Ryan, find the right key man," I said.

"I'm trying. There are like a million of them in this bunch. Wait this one, no this one, no this... ah I think this is it."

"It is?" Alok looked dazed.

Ryan opened the bolt in one stroke, kicking the door open. There it was, the lair of the head of the department of IIT Delhi Mechanical Engineering was ours. Ryan searched the wall and flicked the light open.

"What are you doing?" Alok asked.

"How else will we search, Fatso? Just relax, no one can see us. Take your time and search. And I want to search for something else too."

"What?"

"My lube project proposal. Cherian bloody stuck it in his office and it got nowhere. Prof Veera told me there is a copy here somewhere with his comments."

"Whatever Ryan. Can we search for the paper first?"

"Where do we start?" Alok said as he scanned the piles of paper kept on Cherian's shelves. This could take all night.

"Look for brown bags with a red wax seal. They always open the seal at the time of the papers," Ryan said.

We divided the shelves to save time, and started a quick scan. I ran through journals, administrative documents, course outlines and timetables. Nothing for twenty minutes.

"Anything?" I asked.

Ryan and Alok shook their heads.

Ten minutes later, Ryan stepped back and sat on Cherian's chair.

"What?" I said.

"I have checked my shelves. There is nothing in mine. Got my lube project though. He just says 'no commercial viability or academic value'. What a prick."

"Well, I can't find anything either. Do you want to help?" I said.

"Red seal and brown bag. Indem Majors - Confidential. Is this what you are looking for gentlemen?" Alok said and waved the bag in front of us.

We jumped up.

"Fatso, this is it man!" Ryan said.

"Yes," I said as we hi-fived each other.

"I cannot believe it," Alok said.

"That is because you don't trust me. Though we still have stuff to do. So, wait while I deal with this seal," Ryan said as he emptied his pockets. A blade, candle, lighter and some wax to re-seal the bag.

"Man, you come prepared," Alok said, not able to resist a smile of relief.

"Well, what do you expect? Give me a few minutes now." Ryan held the blade between his thumb and the forefinger and got to work. He slowly sliced the seal open as neatly as possible.

"Where did you learn all this?" I was impressed.

"I am training to be an engineer. This is not that hard to figure out. Now keep quiet," Ryan said.

"How long?" Alok said as sat down on the chair opposite to Cherian's. "Ten minutes. Quiet now else I'll rip off some of the paper," Ryan said. Two minutes passed. I looked at Alok, who sat with his hands in his face. I could tell he was thinking about home again.

"I hope Dad feels better soon. He can really fall sick if he doesn't eat properly. I wish I could do something."

Given Alok's family's love for food, I was pretty sure either of them would fall sick if deprived of it.

"Don't worry, it is nobody's fault. The guy's side seems too greedy if you ask me," I consoled.

"They are all the same. I just want to check on Dad. If only the bloody phone in Kumaon was working," Alok said.

"Yes!" Ryan said as he opened the seal with minimal damage. There were a hundred crisp sheets inside. The fresh copies of the major paper!

"Wow, it's the paper. Let me see it," I said.

"No. I know you guys. You'll just start discussing it right now. I am keeping this with me until we wrap up and get out of here," Ryan said.

"What else needs to be done," Alok said.

"I have to put a fresh seal. Why do you think I brought the candle?" Ryan said.

"Anyway, I think he'll take another million hours to finish," Alok said.

"Hurry up, Ryan," I said.

"Shut up," he said as he heated a fresh blob of wax on the candle. He looked like a craftsman intently at work.

"Hey Hari, Cherian's office has a phone," Alok said.

"Yes, it's right there," I said, pointing to the bookshelves where the instrument was kept.

"Maybe I can just make a quick call from here," Alok said.

"Really? Don't you want to wait and call from outside?"

"It'll get really late. Besides, I just need to check how Dad is. What else do we have to do now?"

"Okay," I shrugged.

Alok stood up and went near the phone.

"I think you have to dial nine to get an outside line," I said.

"Now what the heck are you guys doing? Can't you just sit still," Ryan scolded as he spooned molten wax from the fresh seal.

"Just calling home for a minute. It is too much to wait for you to finish," Alok said.

"Can't you call from outside," Ryan said, "or you are too cheap to spend a buck."

"I just need a minute. You just pay attention to the seal," Alok said as he dialled the number.

He got through pretty soon, and it was clear that his mother had been waiting for Alok to call back. Alok hardly spoke, as his mother vented about her miserable life and the hapless fate of his didi.

Ryan continued dabbing some fresh wax on the underside of the old seal. I tried to pass my time flipping through Ryan's lube proposal. This is when the wires got ahead of us.

I did not know this then, but this is how the insti phone system works. Each prof has a phone in the room that is part of the IIT network. One uses it mainly to dial internal campus numbers. To dial outside, the network connects to a few external lines. When nine is pressed, the internal phone requests an external line, and the campus telecom exchange switches the lines. A control switchboard in the telecom exchange does this automatically. The switchboard lights up a small red bulb for every engaged line. Every time one requests an external line, the light turns green. This control room is in the institute security office on the ground floor of the insti building. One night operator and a guard sit there at night, mostly gossiping and snoozing through their shift. So, a little red bulb lit up on one of the sixth floor phones, and then that red bulb turned green. What was Prof Cherian doing in his room this time of the night? the guard wondered. The operator had the option to listen in to the conversation if he wanted, and he did. This wasn't Prof Cherian. It was a mother reciting the sad tale of her daughter to someone called Alok. The security guard opened his walkie talkie, and requested patrolling guards to check on Cherian's room. The patrolling

guard was joined by another guard as he walked up to the sixth floor.

Unfortunately, like I said, we did not know all this then.

"There are some comments given on some of the pages though," I said.

"All crap. Cherian just didn't want to give this project a shot. I have demonstrated results of efficiency improvements. How could he close this because of no viability? That bastard, ouch!" A drop of wax fell on his fingers.

"Don't worry. You concentrate on the seal. And hurry up, Alok," I said.

The two guards came and stood outside our door. They must have been standing there for two minutes before they opened the door. A lit candle, melted wax, someone on the prof's chair, a few strewn papers. The guards did not need to be too educated to figure it out.

Alok dropped the phone from his hand as he froze. His poor mother must have felt the phone go dead again. Actually, we all went dead. I froze in my chair too, and I don't know how, but Ryan figured out what to say first.

"Oh, guard sahib. Hello, come in let me explain," he said, trying to be as calm as possible.

"Who are you?"

"Guard sahib," Ryan said as he stood up, almost ready to dash out if needed. Alok and I came up behind him as well, waiting for any sudden instructions.

"Don't come near us," the guard said, "we are calling the prof now."

"Oh no guard sahib, listen to us," Ryan said as he went near the door. It was clear we had to make a dash now.

The guard picked up our intentions or something, or maybe he was just scared and stupid. He backed off, and shut us inside the office. We heard him bolt the door and tell his fellow guard to call the prof and the chief security officer. Ryan tried calling the guard again, but it was to no avail. There we were, three of us locked in Cherian's office on the sixth floor at midnight.

We didn't say a word, we just looked at each other's faces. We could do nothing but wait and wait and wait. The longest day of my life wouldn't get over...

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The Longest Day of My Life IV

I KIND OF WENT INSIDE MYSELF IN THAT SHORT SPAN OF time before Cherian's office door opened again and sealed our fate, just sat quietly and ignored what Ryan and Alok said, that is if they did say anything. Future scenes erupted in my mind. By tomorrow morning, all profs, all students at Kumaon and other hostels would know about us. Caught stealing the major paper from Prof Cherian's office, no less! Probably the insti director would also come on this special occasion. Cherian would get us all shot if he could, but either way he would definitely not go easy on us. What did they call it? Disciplinary Committee or Disco, for deciding the fate of the students who broke discipline. Suddenly, my five-point GPA seemed wonderful to me. If only I could pass out of this place with