

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

a simple job and this could all be over. But even keeping that GPA and passing out was not going to be easy now. *Will Cherian soften if we grovelled? Should we just deny that we had come here to cheat? Should we just admit everything and apologize? Can we just rewind a few minutes and stop Alok from making that call? Could I just re-live this one day?*

These stupid questions darted about like rabbits inside my head. I took a deep breath; we just had to live through these moments.

"Someone's come," Ryan said and we stood up. The bolt was opened and around ten people swarmed in. I recognized the two security guards and the chief security officer by their uniforms. The other guy with them was the telephone exchange operator, I knew since he wore an insti uniform. These morons with dull jobs were the heroes of the day.

And then it was a couple of profs from the Mechanical Engineering department. Even Prof Veera was there. And of course, there was the man whose office we had temporarily occupied – Cherian. He stood there shocked, wondering how his office was broken into so cleanly. It was the Who's Who of IIT, most of them in their pajamas. People get more pissed off if they are disturbed in their pajamas.

The guard told everyone to come inside the room, keeping an eye on us as if we'd try to make a dash again.

"You?" Cherian said, looking straight at me. He must have been wondering: his daughter in the morning and his office in the evening. I'd be pissed if someone screwed all over my life in one day.

"What are you doing here?" Prof Veera said, probably aware of what we had been up to. The guard had told everyone

what he had seen a million times; the candle, the seal and the major papers. Maybe Prof Veera was just giving us a chance to verbalize a good lie to get out of this.

We said nothing, hoping silence would evaporate us.

"Cheating, sir, stealing major paper. My boys caught them," the security chief said, proud as if they had broken a CIA ring.

"You were stealing the paper from my office? How did you get in?" Cherian asked me directly.

"You know him?" one of the profs asked Cherian.

"Not really. I have just seen him in class, a very poor student. He was even drunk in my viva, you know Dean Shastri. Yes, that is the only time I remember him from, Hari Kumar, isn't it?"

I guess Cherian did not want to mention our morning tryst to the rest of the profs.

"And the others? What are your names?" the Dean said.

"Alok Gupta, sir. Kumaon hostel, Mechanical Engineering," Alok said.

"Ryan Oberoi, same," Ryan said.

"And you think you are too smart?" the Dean said.

"No sir. That is why we wanted the paper, sir," Ryan said.

Slap! The Dean slapped Ryan right across the face. I don't blame him, Ryan could have chosen a better time to make a wisecrack.

Slap! Slap! Before I realized what was happening, the Dean deposited a slap on Alok and me as well.

God, I tell you, it was humiliating. Profs, security guards and Cherian all staring at us while our faces turned red on the left. But we kept quiet. I secretly hoped they would all slap us and get it out of their system. Heck, they could trash us

senseless as long as that was the only punishment. Please don't do a Disco and screw with our career.

"You are criminals. You realize? You are criminals. Call the police," Cherian said, his whole being trembling, as if he was the one being slapped around.

He was walking to the phone when Prof Veera spoke, "Cherian sir, one minute before you call the police sir, this will become a big deal."

"It is a big deal," Cherian screamed out loud. Just slap us, Cherian, I thought. I know he wanted to, especially me.

"Dean Shastri, you explain to him. Police will mean the case will hit the papers. I mean, do you really want IIT in the news for all the wrong reasons," Prof Veera reasoned.

"Hmmm," Dean Shastri said, rubbing his hands.

"Sir, we have mechanisms in the insti to deal with this, right? The police will not arrive without reporters," Prof Veera said.

"Veera might be right. I don't want the IIT name in mud because of these miscreants."

Even in this situation, I felt the word 'miscreant' was quite cute and funny. I almost smiled.

"Sir, I don't want to spoil the IIT name either. But I want these boys to suffer. Who do they think they are?" Cherian said as he stopped cuddling the phone.

"I agree, this is quite outrageous. We cannot decide their fate so easily. We have a mechanism, not that we use it often. Take them to Disco."

It was time for us to shiver as we heard the last word. Maybe our silence was not so golden after all. Do something oh clever

Ryan, I wanted to say but he stood silent. Only Alok did something. In his usual manner, he began to cry.

"Sir, please sir. We are so sorry, sir..." he said.

"No more discussion. Bloody standard of these students falling every year. We'll talk in an urgent Disco – tomorrow!" declared the Dean.

"Dean sir, you can test intelligence in entrance exams, but how to test for integrity?" the security chief said. He probably got less credit for his achievement that night.

A crowd gathered around the Kumaon hostel notice board the next morning. On a small piece of paper, the size of a bank cheque, the short notice was enough to start long conversations.

"This is to inform that there will be a Disciplinary Committee meeting starting at 10:00 pm tonight in the Mechanical Engineering Department Conference Room. The agenda of the meeting is to decide the course of action for alleged disciplinary breaches by Hari Kumar (Kumaon), Alok Gupta (Kumaon) and Ryan Oberoi (Kumaon) on April 11."

The three of us were too ashamed to come to the notice board. We cut through the crowd as quickly as possible, even though we heard some questions.

"What happened?" said Anurag, "skipping too many classes or what?"

"That doesn't lead to a Disco. Must be something else."

"I think this is big. They are holding the Disco in one day," another Kumaonite said.

"Yes, at night too. Something to do with the Mechanical Engineering department."

We let the smart inmates of Kumaon figure out what was going on. We simply looked down and headed out of campus. Courtesy Neha, I knew a few places where no one would find us. The ice-cream parlour seemed perfect. Alok reached straight for the counter and came back with three strawberry cones.

"Ryan, you got cash? I don't have any," Alok said, passing us our treats.

"Fatso, you can't resist food even at this time," I said.

"It is ice-cream man. Just trying to distract myself, you know I didn't sleep for two seconds last night."

"Me neither," I said.

"What do you think they'll do?" Alok said.

"Maybe an F in Indem," Ryan hazarded a guess.

"An F! I have never got an F. And we'll have to repeat the course," Alok said.

"I know. But it is not the end of the world," Ryan said.

"Are you guys dreaming? They will hold a night-time Disco with all these profs and all to give just us a measly F?" I said.

Ryan and Alok looked at me as if I just stolen the cherry off their ice-cream.

"Sir, come to reality. The Disco meets rarely. And when they do, they have no mercy."

"So what can they do?" Alok said.

"They could expel you from college. Or more commonly, suspend you for a year or a semester."

"Expel?" Alok said, shivering as if the ice-cream had given him a cold.

"They won't expel. That has never happened. Even to people who have been caught stuffing coke bottles you know where," Ryan said.

"They could suspend you for a semester or a year. That is enough to fuck your future. You try getting a job after that," I said.

"For a whole semester? What will we do then?" Alok said. Looked like our man was just waking up.

I kept silent. Ryan finished his strawberry cone and tossed the tissue straight into the bin.

"Say something guys. What will happen then?"

"Figure it out Fatso. Your grade sheet will have no grades for a semester or two. It may actually have 'suspended' stamped all over it. Makes for a great conversation starter in a job interview, eh?" Ryan said.

"I think no one will give you a job, the bloody US types take this cheating stuff pretty seriously. No admission to MBA colleges either – they will ask the same in an interview."

"In other words, our lives are screwed," I said, noticing I had not touched my ice-cream. The cone was a gooey mess, I passed it to Ryan to chuck into the bin.

"And you guys are calm about it? How can you be so calm about it? What will my parents think? What will happen to Didi?" Alok said, putting his elbows on the table and pulling at his hair. Then he tucked his face in his arms, to hide his tears.

"Who the hell says I am calm about it?" Ryan said and stood up, his voice loud enough to stir the sleepy cashier at the counter.

"Be quiet and sit down. There might be people from the insti here," I said.

"Fuck the people. And fuck the insti. And fuck this Fatso who feels only he loses sleep at night and cares about his future! Wake up Mr Alok, this is not the time to cry and pull hair. We have a bloody Disco in ten hours, and maybe we should think about how we are going to answer the bloody profs."

"Oh yes," Alok stood up this time. I guess it is easier to shout when you are standing up. "Oh yes, Mr Ryan," Alok said, "so it is you with all the brains to think strategy at this moment. I say, fuck you and your strategy. What happened to Operation Pendulum?"

It was pointless for me to try and keep them quiet. They needed this I guess.

"Operation Pendulum? You are telling me that was bad strategy? Which bloody baby had to call Mom?" Ryan said.

"Oh yes. And which IITian in history breaks into a prof's office? 'Nothing can happen'. My bloody ass nothing can happen."

They argued for five minutes after which I broke into tears. They were coming on their own, even though I didn't think this Disco would get the better of me. Man, I was crying like Alok. It was embarrassing as hell, but at least they noticed me.

"What is wrong with you now?" Ryan said.

"Nothing. Just stop shouting both of you. This won't help. We need each other now."

"He is right. Sit down, Fatso," Ryan said.

All of us sat in the ice-cream parlour for the next five hours. Over two banana toffee cones, one mint chocolate chip and three raspberry delights we figured out the best arguments to

save our lives. There was little hope, but we had to do what we could. Our strategy was hardly creative – it was to be honest, stay calm and beg for mercy. We only reached Kumaon at six p.m., where I had at least six phone messages from Prof Veera. He wanted to see us before the Disco, and we agreed to meet him at nine.

"You got duplicate what made?" Prof Veera asked again, more in shock at the story we had told him.

"Keys sir. For six rupees at Jia Sarai," I said.

Prof Veera sat back in his chair and burst into laughter.

"This is incredible. I have never heard this in IIT. So Ryan, you thought you could just go into the head of department's office and steal the paper and end up with an A."

"Yes sir," Ryan said in a suitably humble voice.

"And you Hari went and sneaked out the keys from Neha, who you say is your girlfriend, so that you could steal from her dad's office."

"That is correct, sir," I said.

"And you Alok, just went along with this crazy plan of theirs."

"They are my friends, sir," Alok said.

I have to say this statement touched me. For a moment, I forgot the hell around me and felt good that Alok found that reason enough.

"You guys are idiots. You know, just big idiots, that is what you are," Prof Veera said. He seemed pretty harsh, but we liked him. Besides, he was right.

"Sir, we almost made it. Alok made this phone call..." Ryan said.

"Almost made it?" Prof Veera interrupted, "is that what it is all about? You think I am calling you an idiot because you got caught?" The tone of Prof Veera's voice had become firmer. This was the closest he got to being real mad.

"You, Ryan Oberoi, I thought was one of the most brilliant students we had ever had. Your lube project was the best work I have seen come out of a student. I don't care about your grades at all. But you were stupid enough to risk your future for a stupid letter on your grade sheet."

Ryan hung his head.

"And the three of you are best friends. But none of you was able to stop each other from this madness. You know Cherian would have thrown you into jail."

"Sir, we'll say we are sorry sir. Maybe they will be kind," Alok said.

"Kind? This is the Disco, not Mother Teresa's home. You saw Cherian's face," Prof Veera said.

The three of us became silent. We could hear the clock ticking in Prof Veera's office. It was nine-thirty.

"So what is your plea to the Disco? Guilty or not guilty?" Prof Veera said.

"Guilty. They caught us red-handed sir," I said.

"Hmm. I think the first thing you have to do is get the expulsion stuff out of the way," Prof Veera said.

"You mean there is a chance?" Alok said.

"Not too high, unless Cherian is hell-bent on it. What are you going to say about the keys?" Prof Veera said.

"I don't want to bring Neha into this. I thought we'd just say we collected lots of keys and tried them until one worked," I said.

"Why not tell them the truth? You have told me everything," Prof Veera said.

"I don't want Neha to know," I said.

"Listen boys, I am trying to help you here. I think you are in a big mess but if you can twist this a bit, you may save yourself some trouble."

"Like how?"

"One, we should try and present some alternatives of punishment. I will be there, so I can suggest an F in the course, a public apology and hundred hours of community service."

"What is community service?" Ryan said.

"Just helping around in the campus – painting cycle parks or planting trees - that kind of stuff," Prof Veera said.

"I hate that stuff," Ryan said.

"Shut up Ryan. That is fine. Please continue sir," I said.

"Two, I want you to twist the story a bit. I hate lying, but you won't have much of a chance otherwise. So, instead of saying you tried different keys, say that Neha gave the keys to you," Prof Veera said.

"What?" all three of us said in unison.

"Listen, if you say that you know Neha, and somehow she was upset with her father and gave you the keys to get even, it will get personal. The Disco committee will think you didn't actually break in. I don't know, they may see right through it, but I think you should take a chance."

"What will Neha think when she finds out?" I said, "No way we can do this."

"An upset girlfriend is better than a tainted degree and no jobs after college," Prof Veera said.

"Prof Veera is right Hari," Ryan said, "you bring Cherian's family into this and he may withdraw. Last thing he wants is everyone to know that you are his daughter's boyfriend."

"But this will let the whole world know," I said.

"You don't have to tell the whole story. Just say Neha is a recent friend of yours. I am sure Cherian will not dispute that," Alok said.

"Alok, even you think this is the way?" I said.

"Yes, we have to save our ass right? C'mon, it is just a last-ditch survival strategy. Last-ditch survival," Alok said.

I hated myself for agreeing to that story. What would Neha think when she heard what I said? That she helped me by giving the keys? She'd probably hate me forever. The clock struck ten, and it was time to go to the departmental committee room.

Romance was secondary to survival right now.

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The Longest Day of My Life V

THE IIT DISCO IS ABOUT AS FAR AWAY FROM DANCING AS it can get. Here the lighting is dull, the room dead silent and almost everyone elderly. Around ten profs sat around a semi-circular table, while the accused students were bang in the centre. Profs fire questions at students from all directions, the location placing us at minimum distance to each one of them. It is essentially a more efficient design of a courtroom, I guess, Indem-inspired.

Dean Shastri asked us to take our places. Dean Shastri, Director Verma and Prof Cherian formed the co-chairpersons. Prof Veera was one of the other seven profs who mattered little in the scheme of things. A lot of them yawned, probably used to being in bed at this time. Of course, for their students,