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Terminator

THEY SAY TIME FLIES WHEN YOU ARE HAVING FUN. IN THE first semester alone, with six courses, four of them with practical classes, time dragged so slow and comatose, fun was conspicuous by its absence. Every day, from eight to five, we were locked in the eight-storey insti-building with lectures, tutorials and labs. The next few hours of the evening were spent in the library or in our rooms as we prepared reports and finished assignments. And this did not even include the tests! Each subject had two minor tests, one major and three surprise quizzes; seven tests for six courses meant forty-two tests per semester, mathematically speaking. Luckily, the professors spared us surprise quizzes in the first month, citing ragging season and the settling-in period of course; but the ragging season ended soon and it meant a quiz could happen any time. In every class we had to look out for instructor's subtle hints about a possible quiz in the next class.

Meanwhile, I got better acquainted with Ryan and Alok. Ryan's dad had this handicraft business that was essentially a sweatshop for potters that made vases for the European market. Ryan's father and mother were both intimately involved in the business and their regular travel meant Ryan stayed in boarding school, a plush colonial one in hill-town Mussoorie.

Alok's family, I guess, was of limited means, which is just a polite way of saying he was poor. His mother was the only earning member, and last I heard, schoolteachers didn't exactly hit dirt on pay-day. Besides, half her salary regularly went to support her husband's medical treatment. At the same time, Alok's elder sister was getting near what he mournfully called 'marriageable age', another cause of major worry for his household. Going by Alok's looks I guess she wasn't breathtakingly beautiful either.

I also got familiar with Kumaon and other wing-mates. I won't go into all of them, but in one corner there was Sukhwinder or the 'Happy Surd' since his face broke into sunny smiles at proximity with anything remotely human. Next to him was the studious Venkat, who coated his windows with thick black paper and stayed locked inside alone. There was 'Itchy' Rajesh whose hands were always scratching some part of his body, sometimes in objectionable places. On the other side of the hallway were seniors' rooms, including Baku, Anurag and other animals.

Ryan, Alok and I often studied together in the evenings. One month into the first semester, we were sitting in my room chasing a quanto-physics assignment deadline.

"Damn," Ryan said as he got up his easy chair to stretch his spectacular spine. "What a crazy week; classes, assignments,

more classes, assignments and not to mention the coming-attraction quizzes. You call this a life?"

Alok sat on the study desk, focused on the physics assignment, head bent down and sideways, just two inches above his sheet. He always writes this way, head near the sheet, pen pressed tight between his fingers, his white worksheets reflected on his thick glasses.

"Wha..." Alok looked up, sounding retarded.

"I said you call this a life?" Ryan asked, this time looking at me.

I was sitting on the bed cross-legged, attempting the assignment on a drawing board. I needed a break, so I put my pen down.

"Call it what you want," I said, words stifled by a Titanic yawn, "but that is not going to change it."

"I think this is jail. It really is. Damn jail," Ryan said, hitting the peeling wall with a fist.

"Maybe you're forgetting that you're in IIT, the best college in the country," Alok said, cracking knuckles.

"So? You put students in jail?" Ryan asked, hands on hips.

"No. But you expect a certain standard," Alok said, putting his hand up to indicate height.

"This is high standard? Working away like moronic drones until midnight. ManPro yesterday, ApMech day before, Quanto today...it never ends," Ryan grumbled. "I need a break, man. Anyone for a movie?"

"And what about the assignment?" Alok blinked.

"Priya has *Terminator* on," Ryan beguiled.

"Then when will we sleep?" Alok said.

"You are one real muggu eh?" Ryan said indulgently to him.

"I'll go," I said, keeping my drawing board aside, "come Alok, we'll do it later."

"It will get late, man," Alok warned half-heartedly.

I stood up and took his pen, put it into his geometry box. Yes, Alok had a geometry box, like he was about twelve years old.

"Come get up," I said when I noticed two paintbrushes in his box. "Hey, what are the paintbrushes for?"

"Nothing," Alok mumbled.

I lifted the brushes, painting imaginary arcs in air. "Then why do you have them? To give colour to your circuit diagrams?" I laughed at my own joke, waving the brushes in the air. "Or to express your soul in the ManPro class? To draw Prof Dubey's frowny face?"

"No. Actually, they are my father's. He was an artist, but he's paralyzed now."

There are times in life you wish dinosaurs weren't extinct and could be whistled to come and gulp you down. I went motionless, fingers in mid-air.

Ryan saw my face and pressed his teeth together to be simultaneously tch-tch sympathetic to Alok and stop laughing at me. "Really Alok? That's really sad. I'm sorry man," he said, putting his hand around Alok's shoulder. The bastard, scoring over me for no fault of mine.

"It's okay. It was a long while ago. We are used to him like that now," Alok said, finally getting up for the movie while I was still hoping I'd evaporate.

When we walked out, Ryan was with Alok, me trailing six steps behind.

"Well, I have lived in boarding school all my life, so I can't really understand. But it must be pretty difficult for you. I mean how did you manage?" Ryan continued.

"Barely managed actually. My mother is a biology teacher. That was the only income. Elder sister is still in college."

I nodded my head, trying desperately to evince how empathetic to his cause I was, too.

"How do you think I got into IIT? I was taking care of him for the past two years," Alok said.

"Really?" I said, finally getting my chance to get into the conversation.

"Yes, every day after school I was nursing him and reading my books."

Ryan had a scooter, which made it easy for us to get to Priya. It was illegal for three people to ride together in a triple sandwich, but cops rarely demanded more than twenty bucks if they stopped you. Chances of getting caught were less than one in ten, so Ryan said it was still cheap on a probability weighted basis.

Priya cinema at night was a completely different world from our quiet campus. Families, couples and groups of young people lined up to catch the hit movie of the season. We bought front row tickets, as Alok did not want to spend too much. Personally, I think he was just too blind to sit far away. In any case, the movie was science fiction, which I should have guessed given Ryan's choice; he always picked sci-fi movies. I hate sci-fi movies, but who asks me? This one had time travel, human robots, laser guns, the works, presented in an unfunny way. In ten minutes, the obscenely muscular hero's heroics looked too silly to even smirk at, and I was yawning uncontrollably.

"Wow!" Ryan said, bringing his hand to his face as the villain launched a torpedo from his backpack.

"What the hell do you see in these movies?" I whispered, just to jack his trip.

"Man, look at all those gadgets."

"But they're all fake. It is fiction."

"Yes, but we could have them one day."

"Time travel? You really think we could have time travel?" Ryan's ridiculous when he gets excited.

"Hush, it's hard enough to understand the accent guys," Alok objected.

When we returned to Kumaon at midnight, our asses were set on fire, I mean not literally, but everyone from Venkat to Sukhwinder were running around with notepads and textbooks.

"Surprise quiz. Strong rumour of one in ApMech," Happy Surd explained as he furiously riffled through his notes, for once not electrified at our company.

ApMech was Applied Mechanics, and apparently, some student in Nilgiri hostel had visited the professor's office in the evening to submit a late assignment. The professor had sinisterly advised to "keep revising your notes", waggling left eyebrow at the same time. Enough to ring the alarm as news travelled through the campus like wildfire.

"Damn. Now we have to study for ApMech. It will take hours," Alok said morosely.

"And we have the Quanto assignment to finish as well," I reminded.

Everyone gathered in my room to study. It was at two in the morning that Alok spoke. "This whole movie thing was a dumb idea, I told you."

"How was I to know? Anyway, why are you taking arbitration?" Ryan took offence.

"It is not arbit. It's relative grading here, so if we don't study and others do, we are screwed," Alok said, stressing the last word so hard even Ryan was startled.

Just then, a mouse darted out from under my bed.

"Did you see that?" Ryan said, eager to change the topic. He removed his slippers, hoping to take aim and strike the rodent down. However, the rodent had other ideas on his own demise and dived diplomatically back under the bed.

"Yes, there are these creepy mice in my room. Little bastards," I said, almost affectionately.

"You want me to kill them for you?" Ryan offered.

"It's not that easy. They are too smart and quick," I said.

"Challenge?" Ryan said.

"I beg you brothel-borns, not now. Can we please study?" Alok said, literally folding his hands. The guy is too dramatic.

Ryan eased back into the chair and wore his footwear. He opened the ApMech book and exhaled deep through his mouth.

"Yes sir, let us mug and cram. Otherwise, how will we become great engineers of this great country," Ryan mock-sighed.

"Shut up," Alok said, his face already immersed in his workbook.

Ryan did shut up after that, even though he kept bending to look under the bed from time to time. I was sure he wanted to get at least one mouse, but the little creatures smartly maintained a low profile. We finished our Quanto assignment in an hour and then revised the ApMech notes until five, by which time Ryan was snoring soundly, I was struggling to stay

awake and even Alok's eyes had started watering. We still had around a third of the course left, but it was necessary to catch some sleep. Besides, the quiz was only a rumour, we did not know if it would actually materialize.

But rumours, especially ugly ones, have a way of coming true. Thirty minutes into the ApMech class, Prof Sen locked the door and opened his black briefcase. "Time for some fun. Here is a quickie quiz of multiple choice questions," he said.

Prof Sen passed the handouts to the front row students, who in turn cascaded them backward. Everyone in class knew about the rumour, and the quiz was as much a surprise as snow in Siberia. I took the question sheet and glanced over the questions. Most of them were from recent lectures, the part of the course we could not revise.

"Crap. We never got to the lectures for question five onward," I whispered to Alok.

"We are screwed. Let's get screwed in silence at least," he said as he placed his head in his 'study' position, left cheek almost touching the answer sheet.

We never discussed the quiz upon our return to Kumaon that day. Other students were talking animatedly about some questions being out of course. Obviously, we never finished the course, so we did not know better. We did not have to wait for results too long either. Prof Sen distributed the answer sheets in class two days later.

"Five? I got a five out of twenty," I said to Alok, who at next to me in class.

"I got seven. Damn it, seven," Alok said.

"I have three. How about that? One, two, three," Ryan said, counting on his fingers.

Prof Sen wrote the customary summary scores on the blackboard.

Average: 11/20

High: 17/20

Low: 3/20

He kept those written for a few minutes, before proceeding with his lecture on cantilever beams.

"I have the lowest. Did you see that?" Ryan whispered to me, unmoved by cantilever beams. It was hard to figure out what he was feeling at this point. Even though he was trying to stay calm and expressionless, I could tell he was having trouble digesting his result. He re-read his quiz, it did not change the score.

Alok was in a different orbit. His face looked like it had on ragging day. He viewed the answer sheet like he had the coke bottle, an expression of anxiety mixed with sadness. It's in these moments that Alok is most vulnerable, you nudge him just a little bit and you know he'd cry. But for now, the quiz results were a repulsive enough sight.

I saw my own answer sheet. The instructor had written my score in big but careless letters, like graffiti written with contempt. Now I am no Einstein or anything, but this never happened to me in school. My score was five on twenty, or twenty-five per cent; I had never in my life scored less than three times as much. Ouch, the first quiz in IIT hurt.

But take Ryan's scores. I wondered if it had been worth it for him to even study last night. I was two points ahead of him, or wait a minute, sixty-six per cent ahead of him, that made me feel better. Thank god for relative misery!

Alok had the highest percentage amongst the three of us, but I could tell he did not find solace in our misery. He saw his score, and he saw the average on the board. I saw his face, twisting every time he saw his wrong answers.

We kept our answer sheets, the proof of our underperformance, in our bags and strolled back to Kumaon. We met at dinner in the mess. The food was insipid as usual, and Alok wrinkled his pug nose as he dispiritedly plopped a thick blob of green substance mess-workers called *bhindi masala* into his plate. He slammed two rotis on his stainless steel plate and ignored the rest of the semi-solid substances like dal, raita and pulao. Ryan and I took everything; though everything tasted the same, we could at least have some variety of colors on our plate.

Alok finally brought up the topic of the quiz at the dinner table.

"So, now you don't have anything to say?"

Ryan and I looked at each other.

"Say what?" I said.

"That how crap this is," Alok said.

"The food?" I said, fully aware Alok meant otherwise.

"No damn it! Not the damn food," Alok said, "The ApMech quiz." His expression changed from the usual tragic one to a livelier angry one. I found that expression marginally more pleasant to look at and easier to deal with.

"What about the quiz? We're screwed. What is to discuss in that?" Ryan simplified.

"Oh really. We are screwed, no damn doubt in that," Alok said.