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Barefoot on Metal

THE QUIZ MISHAP REINVIGORATED OUR COMMITMENT TO studies for a while. Ryan was quieter when we studied in the rooms, controlling his urge to discuss emergency topics ranging from movies to food to new sci-fi movies, leading to more productive study sessions. Though our scores moved closer to class average, assignments can get dull as hell after a while, and you need a break. Ryan often dozed off between assignments, or stared unseeingly at the wall, whispering curses frequently every time he opened a new book.

"Okay then," he sighed one day, stapling his assignment. "I have finished today's crap. You guys going to mug more or what?"

"Why are you always calling this crap?" Alok asked, perplexed.

"Take a wild guess," Ryan said, tossing his assignment on the table like a used tissue.

"But why?" Alok said, "I mean, surely you studied a lot to get into IIT right?"

"Yes, but frankly, this place has let me down. This isn't exactly the cutting edge of science and technology as they describe themselves, is it?"

I closed my book to join in the conversation. "Boss, mugging is the price one pays to get the IIT tag. You mug, you pass and you get job. What let-down are you talking about?"

"That is the problem, there is this stupid system and there are stupid people like you."

I hate Ryan. When he is on his own trip, we all turn stupid.

"Continuous mugging, testing and assignments. Where is the time to try out new ideas? Just sit all day and get fat like Hari."

Ryan doesn't like mugging, therefore, I am stupid and fat. People like him think they are god's gifts to the world. What's worse, they are.

"I don't have any new ideas. And I am not that fat, am I?" I said turning to Alok. Looking at him I instantly felt better.

"Fatso, look into a mirror. You should do something about it."

"It is genetic, saw a TV documentary once," I defended weakly.

"Genetic, my ass. I can make you lose ten kilos like that." He snapped his fingers.

I did not know where Ryan was going with this, but it could not have been pleasant for me. Being fat was more appealing to me than running behind the insti bus or climbing the stairs of these buildings fifty times a day. "Ryan, forget about me. If you don't want to mug, should we go to the canteen for a parantha?"

"Boss, this is the problem – all food and no exercise. I've decided, Hari has to go on an exercise routine," Ryan said, jumping up. "We start tomorrow morning then."

Ryan decided for other people. I don't know if it was his good looks or just his good-natured vanity that you didn't want to prick, but mostly he got away with it.

"Wait Ryan, what the..." I began.

"Actually, Alok you should come, too. Interested?"

"Go to hell," Alok muttered as he dived back into his books like a squirrel with a nut.

I thought about losing ten kilos. All my life people had called me Fat-Man, to the point where plumpness was part of my identity now. Of course, I hated that part of my identity and Ryan did seem to know what he was doing, and his own body was great. Heck, I thought, it was worth a try.

"What do I have to do?" I capitulated.

"Early morning jogs around the whole campus, around four kilometers."

"No way, I can't even walk four kilometers," I dismissed.

"You wimp, at least try. You'll feel great afterwards," Ryan said.

Sure enough, Ryan mercilessly kicked at my door at five a.m. sharp the next morning. I hate Ryan. Anyway, I opened the door and he stood there waiting for me to change into T-shirt and shorts.

"Four kilometers?" I was drowsy and pitiful at the same time.

"Try, just try," Ryan enthused.

It was still dark outside when I left Kumaon. I was happy for that small mercy – no one would see an eighty-kilo globe-

shaped creature bouncing along the road. To do the four-kilometer route meant reaching the other end of campus, past the hostels, sports grounds, insti Building and the faculty housing. I thought I could cheat and cut corners, but I wanted to give Ryan a chance, not that I hated him any less for it.

My entire body groaned as muscles I never knew existed made themselves known. In ten minutes, I was panting like a trekker on Mount Everest without oxygen, and in fifteen, I felt a heart attack coming on. I panted for a few minutes and started again till I passed the insti building and was in the faculty-housing colony.

Dawn broke, revealing manicured lawns and picture postcard bungalows of our tormentors in class. I passed Prof Dubey's house. It was hard to imagine this man out of class, living in a home, watching TV, peeing, eating at a dining table. By now, I was wet with sweat and my face beyond red, reaching rare shades of purple.

I stopped, huffing and puffing, when I went bump at the knees. Stumbling at the unexpected impact, I kind of whooshed forward, extending my hands just in time to save myself from a bad fall. I sat stunned on the road, recovering from the shock and breathlessness, and then turned around.

A red Maruti car was the culprit! I continued panting as I squinted my eyes to see the driver through the windscreen. *Who was trying to kill me when I was already dying?* I wondered, waiting for my breath to return to normal.

"I am so-so sorry," a female voice announced. A young girl, around my age, in a loose T-shirt and knee-length shorts, clothes that one usually wore at home. She skipped forward in a silly way, which was probably her attempt to run toward me. I noticed she was barefoot.

"I am so sorry. Are you all right?" she enquired, tucking her hair behind an ear.

I was not all right, and it was her damn fault. But when a young girl asks a guy if he is all right, he can never admit he is not.

"Yeah. I guess," I said, flexing my palms.

"Can I give you a lift?" she asked nervously, extending a hand to help me up.

I looked at her carefully as she came closer. Maybe I was seeing a female after a long time or something, but I thought she was really pretty. And the whole just-out-of-the-bed look blew me. Only girls can look hot in their nightclothes: Alok, for instance, looks like a terminally ill patient in his torn vest and pajamas.

"I was actually jogging," I said, holding her hand and getting up as slowly as I could without being obvious. Who wants to abandon a pretty girl's hand? Anyway, I had to after I was standing up.

"Hi. I am Neha by the way. Listen, I am really sorry," she said, adjusting her hair again with the hand I had just held.

"Hi. I am Hari, still alive so it is okay," I grinned.

"Yeah, you see I am learning to drive," she said pointing to the 'L' sign on the windscreen. That is understandable, I thought, you are allowed to hit people if you are learning to drive, especially if you are eye-candy.

Now to be very frank, I wasn't hurt or anything. For one thing, she was driving at like two kilometers an hour, and I think my adipose tissues absorb bumps better than most people's. Still, I wanted to milk this moment.

"You sure you don't need a lift? I feel really bad," she said, wringing her hands.

"Actually, I am sort of tempted to get a drop back to Kumaon," I said.

"Sure. Please come in," she said and chuckled, "if you trust my driving, that is."

We got into the car. I saw her sit carefully in the driver's seat, as if she was running the starship Enterprise or something. Then she placed her bare foot on the accelerator. Now maybe it is because I am an engineer, but that was hot. Bare female skin on metal is enormously sexy. There was dark red nail polish on her toenails, with one or two toes encircled in weird squiggly silver ringlets that only girls can justify wearing. I just wanted to keep looking at her feet but she started to talk.

"Kumaon hostel, so a student, eh?"

"Yes. First year, mechanical engineering."

"Cool. So how are you finding it, college and everything? Fun?"

"Nothing much, just running around to keep up all the time."

"So you have to study a lot? What do guys call it — mugging."

"Yeah, we have to mug. Some damn profs get this vicious joy driving students nuts...."

"My dad is a prof," Neha said.

"Really?" I said and almost jumped in my seat. I was lucky I did not fully express my insightful views on professors and I was hoping she was not Prof Dubey's daughter.

"Yes, I live in faculty housing," she said. The car had passed the housing blocks now, and we were nearing the insti building.

"And that is my dad's office," she said, pointing to one of the dozens of rooms.

"Really?" I said again, my mind racing flashback to gauge if I had done anything that could get me into trouble. "What's his name?" I asked casually.

"Prof Cherian. You probably don't know him, he won't take a course until your third year."

I shook my head. I had heard the name, but never seen Prof Cherian. Then I remembered our first class. "Is he the head of the Mechanical Engineering department?" I said, looking austerely away from her feet.

Sensing my anxiety, she patted my arm while shifting into third gear. "Yes, he is. But don't be tense, he is the prof, not me. So relax." She burst out laughing as if she knew of my fascination with her feet.

We chatted for a few more minutes along the insti-hostel road. She told me about her college, where she was studying fashion design. She had lived in this campus for over ten years and knew most of the professors.

She apologized again when we came near Kumaon, and asked if she could do anything for me.

"No, it is all fine really," I reassured her.

"Sure Hari? So will I see you again when you jog?"

"I guess," I said, dreading another round of Ryan's training.

"Great. Maybe sometime, I can drive you to the deer park outside campus, lots of joggers there. And you get excellent morning tea snacks there. I owe you a treat," she said.

I was nervous at meeting the daughter of my head of department again. But her offer, and mostly she herself, was too irresistible.

"That sounds great," I said leaping out of the car, "free food is always welcome. Keep bumping me."

She smiled, waved and the little red car disappeared from sight. Her image still floated in my head as I reached the Kumaon lawns. Ryan was already waiting there, doing push-ups or pull-downs or something. He had seen me get out of the car and demanded full explanation. I had to then repeat it to Alok. Though they exhibited appropriate excitement, asking me how she looked and everything, they also told me to stay away from her, given she was a prof's offspring.

But they had neither seen her nor talked to her. I was dying to meet her again, was waiting for the next time I bumped into her and could feast silly at the sight of those two bare-naked feet!