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Line Drawing

BANG IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FIRST SEMESTER CAME Ryan's scooter. His parents sent him a dollar cheque as a Christmas gift as everybody else around them was doing in Europe. Ryan was not a Christian and cared two hoots about Christmas, but loved the cheque and cashed it; *voilà* scooter – a beautiful Kinetic Honda in gleaming metallic blue.

When Ryan got it to Kumaon, all the students gathered around it to pay homage, but only Alok and I got to park our butts on it. It was for two people, but Ryan carried both of us; we went to class, canteen and on rare occasions to movies like the *Terminator* zipping away on Ryan's Kinetic, letting the world watch us in envy and the scooter in probable pity, groaning as it was under our combined weight.

Meanwhile, classes got worse. The professors kept up the pressure and the overworked students worked even harder to

beat the average, thereby pushing the average higher. We still studied together, but the resolve to concentrate was breaking down. We had managed to reach average grades in a few assignments, but in physics we had messed up.

One night Alok got a call from home. His father had had a seizure or something and someone had to take him to the hospital pronto. Alok's mother had never done this alone and she sounded hysterical enough to warrant a trip for herself to the hospital.

There was a strong rumour of a physics quiz circulating but Alok had no choice. Ryan offered his scooter, which Alok couldn't drive for nuts. Hence Ryan had to go as well. I did not want to be alone, so I went along.

It was the first time I'd seen Alok's home. I told you he was kind of poor, I mean not World Bank ads type starving poor or anything, but his home had the barest minimum one would need for existence. There was light, but no lampshades, there was a living room, but no couches, there was a TV, but not a colour one. The living room was where lived Alok's father, entertaining himself with one of the two TV channels, close to unconscious by the time we reached. Alok's mother was already waiting, using her sari edge to wipe her tears.

"Alok, my son, look what happens when you are not here," she said in a pathetic voice that would make even Hitler cry. Man, I could totally see where Alok got his whining talent! Anyway, I hired an auto and Ryan and Alok lifted the patient into it. We then went to the hospital, checked him in and waited until a doctor, unfortunate enough to work in an overcrowded free government hospital, saw Alok's father. We

returned to Kumaon at three in the morning exhausted and nauseated by hospital smells.

Of course, you can imagine what happened the next day, the physics quiz, that's what happened and we screwed up big time. We got like two on twenty or some such miserable score. Alok tried to ask the professor for a re-quiz, who stared back as if he had been asked for both his kidneys.

That physics quiz episode broke Alok a bit. Now he was less vigilant when Ryan distracted us from studies.

"You know guys, this whole IIT system is sick," Ryan declared.

"There he goes again," I rolled my eyes. We were in my room.

I expected Alok to ignore Ryan, but this time he led him on with a monosyllable. "Why?"

"Because, tell me, how many great engineers or scientists have come out of IIT?"

"What do you mean? Many CEOs and entrepreneurs have," I said, a mistake as Ryan had not finished yet.

"I mean this is supposed to be the best college in India, the best technology institute for a country of a billion. But has IIT ever invented anything? Or made any technical contribution to India?"

"Doesn't it contribute in making engineers?" Alok asked, snapping shut his book. I knew that with Alok not keeping us in check, we were not going to study any more that day. I suggested we go out to Sasi's for paranthas and skip the mess dinner. Everyone agreed.

Ryan continued to muse. "Over thirty years of IITs, yet, all it does is train some bright kids to work in multinationals. I mean look at MIT in the USA."

"This is not the USA," I said, signalling Sasi's minions to bring three plates of paranthas. "MITs have budgets of millions of dollars."

"And anyway, who cares, I want to get the degree and land a good job," Alok said.

Sasi's was a ramshackle, illegal roadside establishment right outside the IIT hostel gates. Using tents and stools, the alfresco dining menu included paranthas, lemonade and cigarettes. At two rupees each, the butter paranthas were a bargain, even by student standards. Proprietor Sasi knew the quality of food in the mess and did a voluminous business serving dozens of students each day from every hostel. We got three plates of paranthas, and the dollop of butter on top melted and produced a delicious aroma.

"See, it is not always the money," Ryan said, flicking ash. "So IITs cannot do space research, but we surely can make some cheaper products? And frankly, money is just an excuse. If there is value, the industry will pay for research even at IIT."

"So what the hell is wrong then?" I was irritated. I seriously wanted Ryan to shut up, now that the food was here. I mean, if he did not want to study, fine, but spare us the bloody lecture, it wreaks havoc on digestion.

"What is wrong is the system," Ryan denounced soundly, sounding like a local politician. Blame the whole damn system if you can't figure anything out.

But Ryan had more. "This system of relative grading and overburdening the students. I mean it kills the best fun years of your life. But it kills something else. Where is the room for original thought? Where is the time for creativity? It is not fair."

"What about it is not fair? It gets me work, that's all I care," Alok shrugged, taking a break from devouring his rations.

"Wow, that rhymes," I said.

"See your attitude is another problem. You won't get it, forget it," Ryan said.

"That rhymes too," I said and Alok and I broke into giggles. I knew I was annoying Ryan like hell, but I really wanted him to shut up or at least change the topic. That lazy bastard would find any reason to goof off.

"Screw you," Ryan gestured, diving back to his plate.

"Anyway," I said, "so what is the plan for the weekend?"

"Nothing, why?" Alok looked up.

"Well, we have the scooter now."

Ryan stayed silent.

"Hey, stop sulking like a woman." I nudged his elbow until he had to laugh.

"Yes, we can go, you dope. Connaught Place?"

"Why?" Alok repeated.

"Well, they have this cheap dhabha there with the best butter chicken and we can catch a good Hindi movie. And then maybe check out some girls in the market." Ryan's eyes were exaggeratedly lecherous.

"Sounds good," I said, the mention of girls making me think of Neha. I had not bumped into her again, maybe I should go jogging again.

"Alok, you'll come too, right? Or will you mug all day?"

"Uh...there is this ApMech worksheet...anyway, screw it man...yes, I will come," Alok capitulated.

We did go to Connaught Place that weekend and had quite a blast. The movie was what every Hindi movie is like—regular

boy meets girl, boy is poor and honest, girl's dad is rich and a crook. However, the heroine was new and eager to please the crowds so she bathed in the rain, played tennis in mini-skirts and wore sequined negligees to discos. Since all her hobbies involved wearing less or transparent clothing, the audience loved her. The girl's father damn near killed the boy who flirted with his hot daughter, but ultimately the hero's love and lust prevailed. The hero had no damn assignments to finish and no freaky profs breathing down his neck. I know, these Hindi movies are all crap, but they do kind of take your mind away from the crap of real life like nothing else.

After movie came lunch. The dhabha was great as Ryan is never wrong about these things. He ordered for everyone, which he always does. And he orders big—right from boneless butter chicken to daal to paranthas to raita. The spoilt brat even orders the overpriced Coke, I mean, which student orders Coke in restaurants? Anyway, the meal was great, and an overactive desert-cooler sprayed water on our faces and kept the ambience cool.

Tearing his rotis like a famished Unicef kid, Alok got chatty. "This is too good man, the chicken is fundoo here."

"So tell me, Fatso, did you have fun today or not?" Ryan asked.

"Uh-huh," said Alok, mouth too stuffed with food, but he meant yes.

"Then tell me, why the hell do you want to kill yourself with books?"

"Aw, don't you guys start arguing again," I groaned. I had enjoyed my day so far and watching these jokers go at it is really not funny after a while.

"We are not arguing," Ryan said, in a tone that sounded like he was arguing with me now. He took a deep breath. "Okay, here is the thing. I have been thinking."

Oh please, spare us, I thought. But it was too late.

"Guys, these are the best years of our life. They really are. I mean, especially for someone like Alok."

"What, why specially me?" Alok was baffled, nibbling at a chilli from the salad bowl.

"It brings out the amino acids in your eyes," I joked, when he coughed at the tangy spiciness.

"Because," Ryan told Alok, "look at your life before this. I mean, I know you love your dad and everything. But like, you were just nursing him and studying for the past two years. And after college, you'll probably have to live with them again, right?"

"I'll take up a job in Delhi," Alok nodded, a bit more serious now, though his mind was still preoccupied with chicken breast.

"Exactly, so it is back to the same responsibility again. I mean, you will earn and everything, and maybe hire a servant. But still, would you be able to have this kind of fun?"

"I love my parents, Ryan, it is not a responsibility," Alok said and stopped eating. Boy, this must have affected him. Usually, the Fatso will not leave chicken for his life.

"Of course, you love them," Ryan waved a hand. "I mean, I can understand that even though I don't love my parents."

"What?" I said, though I had not wanted to be part of their argument.

"I said I don't love my parents. Is that a big deal?"

Alok raised his eyebrows at me. I mean, if Alok could love his dad, who if you think about it, is no more than a vegetable with vision, how could this brat not love his parents? And his

parents were nice, I mean they gave him everything - the blue scooter, clothes from Gap and money for the damn colas at restaurants. His parents had worked their asses off all their lives, started selling flower pots with two potters, and then moved all over India to make a name until two years ago when they went overseas. They weren't making any big money out there yet but wanted to keep sonny boy happy, this spoilt, pig-headed, marginally good-looking ass who did not love them!

"Screw you," I blessed.

"Screw you! You don't even listen to me," Ryan said.

Yeah right, that when I listened to this idiot all the time.

"Why?" Alok said, getting back to his food.

"I don't know why. I mean, I have been in boarding school when I was six. Of course, like every kid I hated it and cried when they left me. But then, it was at boarding school I got everything. I did well in studies, got noticed in sports, learnt how to have fun and live well and made my best friends. So, somewhere down the line, I don't miss them anymore. Just kind of outgrew them. Sure, we meet at vacation time and they send letters, cash, and everything but..."

"But?"

"But I don't miss them."

"So you don't think that is wrong?" Alok picked teeth.

"Heck, no. I mean, for me my friends are everything, they are my family. Mom and Dad are nice, but I don't love them the way I love my friends. I mean, I don't love them, but I love my friends."

"So you love us then Ryan aah? *I love you*," Alok said in a falsetto; he was obviously satiated, his lighter mood a proof of his post-gluttony bonhomie.

"Up yours, Fatso, love you my ass," Ryan said and some heads turned to look at us.

Ryan, however, came back to his earlier theory.

"Anyway, my point is, these are our best years. So either we can mug ourselves to death, or tell the system to stuff it."

"And how exactly do we tell the system to stuff it?" I enquired.

"I mean, not like stop mugging completely or something, but like, let us draw a line. We can study two-three hours a day, but do other stuff, say sports, have you guys ever played squash? Or taken part in events – debates, scrabble and stuff, an odd movie or something sometimes. We can do so much at the insti."

"Yeah, but very few people do it. And they are the ones with pretty bad GPAs," Alok said.

"See, I am not saying we stop mugging. We just draw the line. A day of classes, then three hours a day of studies and the rest is our time. Let's just try, just one semester. Isn't it fair? A kind of decentralization of education."

Alok and I looked at each other. Ryan had a point. If I never played squash in college, I'd probably never play it again. If I did not take part in Scrabble now, I'd never do it when I had a job.

"I can try," I said, mostly to agree with Ryan. He would not have stopped otherwise anyway.

"Three hours is not enough." Alok was doubtful.

"Okay, three and a half for our super-mugger," Ryan said, "Okay?"

Alok agreed, but his voice was so meek, it sounded like the chicken he just ate speaking from within.

Ryan was elated, and he drove us back to Kumaon at speeds that made the traffic police dizzy. No one stopped us, or rather, we didn't stop. I covered the number plate with my foot, so that cops could not take it down. After all, this was a celebration of drawing the line.

Meanwhile, I ran into Neha at the campus bookstore. I had not met her since she had tried to kill me and it wasn't anyone's fault. Mostly that whole jogging plan was a bad idea. Even with the prospect of meeting Neha, I just could not wake up. I did try once again, but I was late and did not see her car. After that, all my motivation dropped and Ryan gave up on waking me up. He had to, cause I kind of threatened to withdraw from his draw-the-line study plan. So, what I'm trying to say is, when I saw Neha again, it was a nice surprise.

"Hi," I said, raising my hand to catch her attention.

She looked at me, and then kept looking, her face expressionless. She acted as if she did not recognize me. Then she went back to flipping pages of the notebooks she had just bought. Now that was hell, I mean, if you are in a public place and say 'hi' to a girl, all beaming and everything and she's like 'have we been introduced?'

The shopkeeper looked at me, as did a few other customers, and I felt like low-life though I gave it another try. I mean, just a few weeks ago she was all sympathetic and friendly, so maybe she just couldn't place me.

"Neha, it's me! Remember the car accident in the morning?" I said.

"Excuse me," she said huffily and departed.

This time the shopkeeper looked at me like I was a regular sex-offender. The girl bumped me and gave me a lift and all dammit, I wanted to scream, even as I bought my pencils and loose sheets. So I am not that attractive and that is reason enough not to recognize someone in public because I guess being friends with ugly people kind of rubs off badly on you. I had been some sort of a loser in school as well, so this was not a total shock. I mean what happened to me once in my school, I don't even want to get into all that but somehow, I felt strange. I don't know, Neha did not look like that kind of girl.

I walked out of the shop as quickly as possible to get away from the humiliation. I was feeling crap. I mean, she could have at least said "hi," I thought. I know I am fat and if I were a girl, I'd probably not talk to me either. I was walking alone on a narrow path connecting the bookshop to the hostel, when someone tapped my shoulder. I turned around and guess who?

"Hi," said Neha.

Go to hell, was my instant mental reflex. But I turned to look at her and damn, she was pretty. And with that one tiny dimple on her right cheek flashing every time she smiled... Now try saying 'go to hell' to that!

"Hi. Neha, right?" I said, this time really careful and slow.

"Of course. Hey, I am really, really, really sorry, I could not reply to you properly there. There's a reason," she divulged.

Now, girls do this all the time, they think repeating an adjective makes it more effective; the three 'reallys' were supposed to constitute an apology.

"What reason?" I said.

"It is just that, I mean...can we just forget it?"

"No, tell me why?" I insisted.

"The shopkeeper there knows me and my dad for the last ten years and they talk regularly."

"So?"

"My dad is really strict about me talking to boys and he will totally flip out if he hears I am friends with a student."

"Really? Just greeting someone?"

"He is like that. And campus rumours always get blown out of proportion. Please, I am sorry."

She was being a bit ridiculous, I thought, but I kind of knew where she was coming from. Some girls' dads are a bit touchy, and with over a thousand boys with their proportional quota of hormones on campus he would be worried.

"Well, I can't see you then anyway, right?"

"You can as long as it is out of campus."

"We live here!"

"Yes, but there is a world outside. We can go to the Hauz Khas market. Do you feel like some ice-cream?"

It is hard enough to say no to pretty girls or to ice-cream but when it's offered together, it is well nigh impossible. I said yes, and she instructed me to walk out the campus gate and walk two blocks to an ice-cream parlour. She would come there as well, but gave me a five-minute headstart, walking sedately behind me.

It was completely weird to walk alone that way, and I kept thinking how stupid I'd look in the parlour if she did not show up. At least I'd have ice-cream, I thought. Food is almost as good as girls.

But Neha did show up and inside the Cadbury's ice-cream parlour she was a different person.

"So, Mr Jogger, did not see much of you after that day. Did I scare you off?" She began to giggle. Girls do this all the time, say something half-funny, and laugh at it themselves.

"No, it's just a pain to wake up."

"Well, I was kind of hoping to see you," she confessed.

"Yeah, looked like it at the bookshop."

"I said I am sorry, Hari," she said, and touched my arm again like she had earlier. I kind of liked that, I mean, which guy wouldn't. You have this pretty girl all smiley and sorry and touching your arm; better than ice-cream I tell you.

There are two kinds of pretty girls in Delhi. One is the modern type, girls who cut their hair short, wear jeans or skirts, and tiny earrings. The second is the traditional type who wears salwar-kameez, multi-coloured bindi and large earrings. Neha was more the second type, and she wore a light-blue *chikan* suit with matching earrings. However, she was not a forced traditional type, like fat girls who have no choice but to wear Indian clothes. Neha was just fine, and actually way out of my league, with her long light brown hair, which she mostly left open, a curl catapulting carelessly on to her forehead. Her face was completely round, but not because she was fat or anything, just a natural cute shape. I just kept looking at her as my strawberry ice-cream melted.

"Friends?"

"I guess so. You know, when you ignored me there, I first thought it was because of the way I am."

"What way are you?"

"Never mind," I said.

I told Neha about our harebrained scholastic plan.

"Three hours? Pretty brave I must say. Guess you are underestimating the profs and their love for assignments," she said, scraping up whatever remained in her cup.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Anyway, you tell me about yourself. Learnt driving now?"

"Yes, I even got a licence," she chirped and opened her bag to show it to me. She started taking stuff out of her handbag and a million things came out – lipsticks, lip balms, creams, bindis, earrings, pens, mirrors, wet tissues and other stuff that one can live without. She found what she was looking for eventually.

"Wow. Neha Samir Cherian, female, 18 years," I read her name aloud.

"Hey, stop it. You are not supposed to notice ladies' ages."

"That is for sixty-year-old women, you are young." I returned her licence.

"Still, I like chivalrous men," she said, repacking her bag and the million belongings.

I did not know if it meant something. I mean, did she want me to know what kind of men she liked, or did she want me to be like the men she liked, or did she like me. Who knows? Figuring out women is harder than topping a ManPro quiz.

"Samir, isn't that a guy's name?"

"It is my brother's. I decided to keep it when I got this licence made."

"Really? What does your brother do?"

"Not much," she shrugged. "He's dead."

Now this was unexpected. I mean, I just thought I'd tease her on a mannish middle name and everything but this was turning heavy. "Oh!" I said.

"It's fine, really, he died one year ago. We were just two years apart, so you can imagine how close I was to him."

I nodded my head. Her beautiful face was turning sad and I wished I could do something clownish to change subjects.

"How did it happen?" I asked, for it seemed the polite thing to do.

"A freak accident. He was crossing the rail-tracks and got hit by a train."

I wondered if I could take a chance and hold her arm like she had a few minutes ago. I mean, that is how shallow I was. She was all choked up and everything, but all I could think of was if I could make my move.

I shifted my hand closer, but she startled me by talking again. "Life goes on, you know. He was my only sibling, so that is kind of tough. But life goes on," she repeated, more to herself than to me.

I pulled my hand back. I sensed this was not the best moment.

"Ice-cream? C'mon let us do round two," she said brightly and went up to the counter without waiting for me. She returned with these two big sundaes, and she was smiling again.

"So he had a train accident? In Delhi?"

"Yes. You don't think that can happen?" she asked challengingly.

"No....o."

"C'mon, tell me something cheerful about your hostel."

I told her about Ryan's scooter and how we over-speed on it and things. It was hardly interesting, but it changed the topic. We talked about other things until dusk and Neha's internal clock went off.

"Have to go," she jumped up. "Shall we walk back?"

"Yeah. Separately though right?" I was catching on fast.

"Yes, sorry please," she said in a mock-baby tone that girls lapse into at the slightest provocation.

I stood up, too.

"So, Hari?"

"So what?"

"Aren't you going to ask me out or what?"

That stumped me. I mean, of course I'd wanted to but thought she'd say no for sure and then I'd have felt crap all night. I would have been satisfied with the ice-cream and everything but this was kind of neat, and now I had no choice anyway.

"Huh? Sure. Neha, would you like to go out...with me?"

She had made it pretty safe for me, but I tell you, the first time you ask a girl for a date, it is like the hardest thing. Almost as stressful as vivas.

"Yes, of course I will. Meet me at this parlour next Saturday, same time as today."

I nodded.

"And next time, don't be this shy IIT boy, just ask."

I smiled.

"So, what are you waiting for? Leave now."

A demure five minutes ahead of her, I pleasantly dwelt on the mechanics of the female mind, waddling back into hostel.