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Make Notes not War

U.S. WAS GUNNING FOR IRAQ, TAKING AS ITS FIRST CASUALTY our majors, or end-semester exams. Thousands of kilometres from our campus, a despotic dictator annexed another smaller despotic dictator's country. It just so happened that both countries had heaps of oil and that made the whole world take notice. Next, the world's most powerful country asked the dictator to get the hell out. Big dictator refused and very soon it became clear that he would be attacked.

So, what the hell did this have to do with the three of us at IIT, you'd think. If this was one of Ryan's stupid sci-fi movies, the three of us could be like involved in a conspiracy, using the IIT lab to provide superior weapons to the CIA or something. But this was not sci-fi, and the three of us considered ourselves lucky to complete the ManPro welding assignment on time, let alone provide superior war technology.

No, the Gulf war did not personally invite our involvement but it was a big bang that swallowed our first semester majors, a catalyst for all our competitive, macho instincts.

But before that let me tell you of the glory days of the short-lived 'draw-the-line' policy. As per plan we studied for three exact hours every day, mostly late unto night, which meant we had the evenings free for fun.

"The best game ever invented," Ryan said as he took us to the squash courts despite Alok and me looking like guys who never came near a mile of a squash court.

"This game will rest your mind, and burn some of that fat off." Ryan, who had been the squash captain in his school, tossed warm-up shots in the court.

Unless you are like a champion or something, you probably know how difficult the damn game is. The rubber ball jumps around like a frog high on uppers, and you jump around it to try and connect it to your racket. Ryan had played it for years and Alok and I were hopeless at it. I missed connecting the ball to the racket five times in a row, and Alok did not even try moving from his place. After a while, even I gave up. Ryan tried to keep the game going as we stood like extra pillars on court.

"C'mon guys, try at least," Ryan called out.

"I can't do this," Alok said and sat down on the court. The guy is such a loser. I mean, I could not play squash for nuts, but at least I won't sit down on the court.

"Let us try again tomorrow," Ryan said, optimistic to say the least.

He dragged us to court for ten days in a row, but Alok and I got no better. We found it hard enough to even spot where the ball had gone, let alone chase it.

"Ryan, we can't do this man," Alok said plaintively, panting uncontrollably. "If you really want to play this, why don't you find other partners?"

"Why? You guys are getting better," Ryan said.

Yeah right, maybe in thirty years, I thought grimly.

"So you don't enjoy this?"

What was Ryan thinking? Enjoy? *Enjoy*? I was in danger of tearing that ball into roughly fifty pieces.

"Not really," I ventured mildly.

"Fine then, we don't have to do this. I mean, I can give up squash," Ryan said.

"No, that is not..." Alok said.

Ryan had already decided, no point arguing with him. It was his whole 'where my friends go, I go' stand, though I kind of felt bad making him give up his favourite sport.

"You can play with others," I suggested.

"Others aren't my friends," Ryan said in a firm voice that sounded like the final word. Alok and I shrugged and we left the court.

After squash came something tamer and less active, chess. Alok and I felt somewhat up to this one, for, unlike squash, we could at least touch and move the game pieces. But Ryan usually won, and I would never be passionate about bumping off plastic pieces like him.

Apart from chess, we spent our free time riding Ryan's scooter, feeling the fierce wind whistle through our hair. We caught every new movie, visited every tourist destination in Delhi, did everything, went everywhere.

For the most part, we managed fine within the three hours assigned to studies. Sometimes assignments took longer, leaving

no time for revision. That worried Alok, especially when the end-semester exams edged closer, and he suggested increasing the limit. And we would have if it hadn't been for one thing – the afore-mentioned Gulf war.

Now wars happen all the time and India alone has fought more than it can afford. But the Gulf war was different, as it came right on TV. CNN, an American news channel, had just opened shop in India and brought the deserts of Iraq right into our TV room.

"This is CNN reporting live from the streets of Baghdad. The sky is lit up with the first air raid," a well-groomed person told us.

Alok, Ryan and I looked up from our chess game. It was sensational, spectacular and unlike anything we had ever seen on TV. To put it in context, this was before cable or any private channels came to India. Until then we had two crummy government channels in which women played obsolete instruments and dull men read news for insomniacs and retards. Colour had only arrived two years ago, and most programs were still black and white. Then, in one quick week, we had the glitzy, jazzy and live – CNN.

"Is this real? I mean is this happening?" Alok looked dazed.

"Of course, Fatso. You think this is a play?" Ryan scoffed as two American pilots hi-fived themselves after hours of pounding a perfectly real city. A CNN reporter asked them questions about their mission. The soldiers told about bombing a godown, and taking down a power station that gave electricity to Baghdad.

"Wow, the Americans are going to win this," Alok said.

"Don't underestimate the Iraqis, who have fought wars for ten years. Americans are just pounding from the air," Ryan said.

"Yes, but America is too powerful. Saddam hasn't a clue."

"He does, wait till a land battle happens," Ryan defended.

The war sucked us in like quicksand, Alok and Ryan got really into 'who is going to win this' kind of crap. I mean, you stop doing that when you are twelve I think (Superman or Batman?), but there was no stopping them. I liked watching the war as well, though I primly took no sides.

Iraq was kind of anonymous then, and we unabashedly cheered on America. IIT cared about America. Most of our foreign aid came from rich American firms and quite a large percentage of our alumni went on scholarship there and for jobs, constituting a chunk of the brain drain. So, unsurprisingly, our heart bled for the US.

At the same time, the war visuals became more gruesome. Americans pounded Baghdad non-stop, and Saddam hid himself deep in one of his oil wells I think. Many times, Americans hit civilian targets and people died and everything, and that was crap. I mean, the aid to IIT was fine, but how can you justify bombing kids? But then, Saddam was kind of this loser General anyway, and apparently shot his own people when he was grumpy. Oh, it was impossible to take sides in the Gulf war. And it was all pointless for us anyway. These guys would realize this soon.

"Man, the majors are eight days away," Alok finally said one day. "We've got to switch off the TV."

"We still study three hours though," Ryan quirked an eyebrow.

"Screw three hours! It's not enough," I contributed.

"I think Iraq will win," Ryan said.

"Drop it, man, America has busted him," Alok said, "so please I beg you Ryan, let's study before we're busted too."

"Not yet, ground battle not done yet," he said righteously.

Luckily, the war ended five days before the majors. America won big-time, and Iraqis ate crow before ground battle. Saddam left Kuwait alone and Americans were happy all the oil in the world was theirs to burn and Ryan did not eat for a day or so.

"This is not fair. Real wars are fought on the ground," he wailed as we started revisions for the final tests in our room.

"Shut up, Ryan. Americans got what they wanted. Now can we study?" I said.

"Unfair man. US is a schoolroom bully."

"ApMech, ApMech" Alok muttered like a mantra.

Squash, chess and the war – all ate into our studying hours. In the five days before exams, we dropped the three-hour rule, well we had to; the heaps of course material was un-doable even if we studied thirty hours a day. It was important to clamp down on Ryan and we studied until three in the morning every day and passionately prayed India would go to war on the morning of our first majors.

A day before the majors were practical tests. It was the only part of the course Ryan enjoyed, and he dragged us early to the physics lab. We were in the same group and had to conduct an electrical setup and then answer questions in a viva-voce. We got a resistance-voltage relationship testing experiment.

I hated practical tests. Most of all, I dreaded the viva-voce. I don't know if I told you about my condition; it strikes me

whenever someone looks me in the eye and asks me a question. My body freezes, sweat beads cover me brow to groin, and I lose my sense of voice. How I hated vivas and when Ryan was all excited assembling the circuit for the experiment, I hated him too.

"Hey guys, watch this," Ryan said, holding the circuit components in his hand.

Alok looked up from his notebook.

Ryan spent the next ten minutes connecting resistors, capacitors, switches and cables to each other. It was completely unconnected to our experiment and Alok was seriously getting worried.

"Ryan, can you please connect the resistor-voltage setup so we can start our experiment?" Alok said.

"Wait Fatso, we have two hours to do the experiment. Do they have a small speaker here?" Ryan fumbled through the component box.

"What do you need a speaker for?" I said even as Ryan found one and made the final connection.

"For this," Ryan said and switched his circuit on. He moved a few connections, and soon Hindi music came from the speaker.

"Ghar aaya mera pardesi..."

"What the hell!" Alok jumped as if a ghost had shimmered into the lab.

"It is a radio, stupid," Ryan said, eyes all lit up, "I knew we had all the parts to make one."

"Ryan," I said, as firmly as possible.

"What?"

"We are having a damn major here," I said.

That is Ryan. The guy will do clever things but only at the wrong time and wrong place.

Alok panicked, too. "The viva is in twenty minutes, boss."

Ryan ripped off his circuit and looked at us in disdain as if we were tone-deaf listeners who had rejected live Mozart.

We just about managed to finish the circuit on time when Prof Goyal walked in.

"Hmm...", the Prof said tugging at the circuit wires. Ryan had made the circuit; he was good at this, we trusted him.

"So, Ryan what will happen if I change the 100-ohm resistor with a 500-ohm resistor?"

"Sir, we would have higher voltage across, though there would be a higher heat loss as well."

"Hmm..." Prof Goyal scratched his chin in response, which meant Ryan was right.

"So Alok, how do you read the stripes on this resistor to get the ohm resistance?"

"Sir, the red stripe is a 100-ohm, then 10 for the blue, implying 110 ohm."

Our group was doing well. But Prof Goyal was not done. Despite my frantic hopes, he turned to me.

"So Hari, if I add another resistor on top of the 110 ohm resistor, what happens to the current flow?"

A trick question. The current flow depends on how one connects the new resistor, in series or parallel. In series, the current would drop. In parallel, it would increase. Yes, this was the answer. I think so, right?

I had recited the answer in my mind. But Prof Goyal stared at me and me alone while asking the question, not surprising

since he prefixed the question with what was a good facsimile of my name.

"Sir..." I quivered as my hand started to shiver. My condition was upon me.

"What will happen to the current flow?"

"Sir...I...sir," I said, inexorably tumbling toward total paralysis. I mean, I totally knew the answer but what if it was wrong? I tried articulating, but the thoughts did not cash into words.

"Sir, the current flow depen..." Ryan intervened, trying to save the situation.

Prof Goyal raised his forefinger.

"Quiet, I am asking your group member, not you."

I shook my head and lowered it. There was no use, I had given up.

"Hmm..." Prof Goyal said, not scratching any part of his face. "The standard of this institute is going down day by day. What are you, commerce students?"

Calling an IIT-ian a commerce student was one of the worst insults the profs could accord to us, like a prostitute calling her client a eunuch. The institute was the temple of science and anyone below standards was an outcaste or a commerce student.

Prof Goyal scribbled a C+ on our group experiment sheet, and tossed it at us. Ryan caught it, I think.

We did not have much of a chance to discuss the physics practicals, as the majors started the next day. I had even postponed my next rendezvous with Neha until after the exams. I had called her once, getting her number from the faculty's internal directory. She freaked out, telling me not to call home without notice. How the hell was I supposed to give

her notice? Anyway, we had fixed to meet the day after my majors.

Majors were when everyone studied in Kumaon, lights remained on in rooms until dawn, people rarely spoke – and then only on matters of life or death – and consumed endless cups of tea in the all-night mess. Ryan, Alok and I scrambled to revise our six courses. The exams schedule was three continuous days, leaving little time to discuss the tests. I knew I had done fine in some tests and screwed up some. Alok had developed a permanent scowl and Ryan could maintain his laid-back air only with the utmost effort; no jokes, majors blow the wind out of anyone. ManPro, ApMech, physics, mathematics, chemistry and computing. One by one, we finished them. When majors ended, it did seem like the worst was over though the results come only after two weeks.

Those two weeks between the end of majors and the results were bliss. Even though the second semester began, no one really got into the new courses until they knew how they'd done in the first semester. The profs were busy evaluating tests, going easy on new assignments, giving us plenty of time to kill. Ryan upgraded us from chess to crossword puzzles, taking us from cryptic clues to rhyme words to anagrams.

Meanwhile, I met Neha again on a summery evening early into the second semester even though she had short-circuited when I called her. It was the same ice-cream parlour.

"God, are you crazy or what, calling at home?" she greeted.

I didn't know what to say. I thought I'd been pretty cool to think of getting the number from the profs directory and everything.

"How else am I to reach you?"

"My parents are very strict about me getting calls from boys."

I couldn't tell her, "Your parents sound like regular psychos," so in *non-sequitur*, I asked, "Strawberry?"

She was wearing a demure white salwar-kameez that day. She held my hand as she took the cone from me. God, she is beautiful, I tell you.

"So how am I supposed to reach you?"

"Call me on the 11th."

A pink tongue darting out to catch some melted cream from reaching the ground had disoriented me. "Huh?"

"Just call me on the 11th of any month."

Now Neha is beautiful and everything, but she can be pretty loony at times.

"What? Why 11th?"

"Because no one is at home that day. You see, my brother died on 11th May. So on every 11th my parents go to this temple near the rail-tracks where he died. They are gone most of the day."

"Really? And you don't go?"

"I used to. But it used to remind me of Samir a lot. I'd be depressed for days afterward and the doctor told me not to go."

She said it matter of factly, as if she were choosing an ice-cream flavour. It was strange, but a hell of a lot better than her gearing up to cry or something; I can't stand people who cry in public.

"Only on 11th?"

"Well for now, that is the only safe date," she said and laughed, "why? You want to talk more often?"

I did not answer her. I mean, I just thought it weird that I could call her only on that one day a month, like I had a dental appointment or something. But girls are weird, I was learning.

"So tell me," she said tapping my hand again to change the topic, "how were the majors?"

I loved it when she touched me in any way, that's how deprived or depraved I was; I almost forgot her question in the aftermath of the tiny localized tremors exploding on my skin's surface.

"Uh majors...nothing great. Results come in one week or so."

"Did well?"

"Not really."

"You want me to put in a word to Dad to increase your grades?" she said.

"Can you?" The pinkness enveloped me.

"I'm kidding."

Of course. She giggled as if she had got me. Like I thought I believed she could help me with my grades or something. Girls love laughing at their own jokes but Neha amused is better than Neha looking around furtively.

I suddenly leaned forward, bringing my face close to hers. Catching her breath, stifling that laugh and pink tongue, she watched me wide-eyed. I removed the wallet from my back pocket and sat down casually again.

"What happened?" I asked idly.

"I thought...never mind." She blinked.

Ha, gotcha.