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Five-point Something

"THEY'RE OUT!" ALOK SAID, SHAKING RYAN'S SHOULDER on a Saturday morning as if India had won the World Cup or nude women were rolling on the grass outside. "The major results are out!"

"I want to sleep," Ryan said, burrowing deeper under the quilt that Alok eventually succeeded in tugging off.

We reached the insti where a crowd of students had gathered to see their first set of grades. From these one could determine their first grade point average, or GPA, on the 10-point scale. The topper would be close to 10.00, while the average would be around 6.50. We, however, were closer to the bottom. Clicking through the scientific calculator, Alok calculated our scores.

"Ok, Hari is at 5.46 and... Ryan is at 5.01 and I ...I'm at 5.88," Alok said.

"So all of us are five-pointers," I said, as if making a particularly insightful comment.

"Congrats Alok, you have topped amongst us," Ryan said.

Topped amongst us, I thought. As if we were the high-brain society or something. These were pathetic grades: we ranked in the high 200s in a class of 300 students. Alok recalculated his score, hoping for some miracle to happen on the calculator. But miracles never happen in IIT, only crap grades do.

"Screw that. Bloody hell, I am just a 5.88. This is so below average."

"We knew that, right?" Ryan said, "Whatever. Alok, let's celebrate this over chicken."

"Celebrate!" Alok spluttered. "I have just screwed up any chance of getting a US scholarship or a good job and you want to bloody celebrate?"

"Grow up, Fatso. What do you want to do? Mug more in mourning?" Ryan was calm.

"Fuck you," Alok said.

It was the first time he had used the 'F' word. From him, it sounded peculiar, I mean he is still a kid.

Ryan's calmness vanished faster than a prof's smile. "What did you say?" he turned toward me, "What did the Fatso say?"

Why was the bastard dragging me into this? Ryan had damn well heard what Alok said. In fact, all the twittering students around us had heard it too.

"C'mon guys, let's take the show to the hostel," I pleaded. I don't care if they kill each other, but privacy I insist on. They were in no mood to let go and for a moment I thought they were going to ignore me and have a fisticuff right there. Somehow, I knew this wasn't one of the regular Ryan-Alok

arguments; this had, at its core, their basic character contrasts.

"Let's go," I said again and they dragged their feet back to the scooter. Ryan rode us back to the hostel as rashly as he possibly could, intentionally going over every bump on the road. He has his own strange way of sulking I tell you.

We sat in Ryan's room after dinner, we had not spoken a word since the insti. I had thought a little about my little GPA. Yes, a five-pointer was pretty crap. From now on, every prof would know that I was a below average student and that would influence my grade in future courses. I knew a few five-pointers who were panned at campus recruitment last year. This was crap, how did I get into this situation? Was I just not smart enough? At the dinner table, other students were either plain morose or extremely excited. There was the studious Venkat, who never left his room and was always quiet at meals. Today, he was smiling. He had a nine point five. He sat next to Alok, and told his stories of topping in four out of six courses. Alok was talking only to him and totally ignoring us. There were others too. Even the Smiling Surd in our wing had managed a respectable seven point three. I think the three of us were the lowest in Kumaon or something. I could have mulled more over my future, or rather the lack of it, but Ryan and Alok's swollen faces filled my immediate vision.

We trooped into Ryan's room and sat quietly for half an hour or so. Nobody opened a book, looked at each other or said a word. I wondered if we were going to stay quiet forever. I mean, that couldn't be such a bad thing. We could attend

class, study together and eat together, quiet as mice. Maybe our grades would improve as well. It really isn't that important for people to talk.

But my rosy fantasy of silence was finally broken by Ryan.

"So, you are not going to apologize?" he asked belligerently.

"Apologize? Me? It is *you* who should apologize Ryan," Alok said.

"You are the one who said 'fuck you' in front of the whole damn insti," Ryan said, "and I should apologize? Hari, can you believe this? *I should apologize.*"

Now this had nothing to do with me, so I ignored Ryan. Let the two nuts figure it out amongst themselves.

"You just don't fucking get it do you?" Alok said, going the 'damn' way with 'fuck'.

Ryan kept silent.

"Get what?" I said. I mean, I really wanted to know what I was missing in this moronic conversation.

"Get this. Today I got a GPA of 5.88. Damn it, a 5.88. Over 200 students have done better. Do you know in my twelve years in school I never even got a second rank."

In most parts of the world, that would be a pretty loser statement to make. To announce that you were like this nerd in school is hardly something to be proud of. But that is Alok for you.

"So?" Ryan said, "your insti grades are bad. And who cares about how much you mugged. Why the hell should *I* apologize?"

"Because damn it...because it is *your* damn fault," Alok said and stood up.

Now that was whacko. Poor Ryan had just managed to scrape a five, and now he was getting crap from Alok.

"My fault?" Ryan said and started laughing. "Hari, listen to this. Fatso screws up his grades and it is Ryan's fault. *My fault*. Hey Alok, have you gone nuts or something?"

"Say something," Alok beseeched me.

"Say what?" I looked away from both of them.

"It is okay. If Hari does not have the guts to say it, I can. *You and your ideas*, Ryan. Study less, draw the line, enjoy the best years, this system is a machine, crap, crap and more crap all the time."

Ryan stood up from his chair as well; I think it gives you an edge in the argument if you stand up, kind of more serious and purposeful.

"I know you are upset and everything but there is no need to overreact. Just some stupid grades..."

"I am not overreacting," Alok said and sat back down. "And it is not just stupid grades for me. I don't have my parents earning dollars like yours. I came to this institute with a purpose. To do well, get a good job and look after my parents. And you have fucked it up."

Another F-word; Alok was still upset I guess.

"Stop saying fuck all the time," Ryan said.

"I will say whatever I want. That is the problem. No one can say anything to you. You propose something, Hari blindly agrees and we all end up doing it. You are just a spoilt brat. Someone who wants to do whatever he wants without caring for his friends."

"What? What did you just say? That I don't care for my friends?" Ryan said. Though his voice was notched at a menacing pitch, I noticed his hands starting to shiver a little bit.

"No. You don't care about anything – not studies, not the insti, not your parents and not your friends. You just want to have your fun."

"You're crossing the line here," Ryan warned.

"I am drawing the line for a change. From now on, I am not going to hang out with you anymore, it is official."

Now it was pretty clear that Alok was overreacting. "What are you saying, man?" I said.

"No drop-shrop it. I have listened to you guys for the entire first semester and screwed up everything," Alok said.

"So what are you going to do?"

"Like I said, no more hanging out with Ryan. From now on, I am going to be with Venkat. He has agreed to let me study with him. He got a nine point five you know?"

I felt disgusted. Nobody in Kumaon talked to Venkat; given a choice he wouldn't talk to himself. He had a good GPA and everything, but he was hardly human. Venkat woke up at four in the morning to squeeze in four hours of muggins before classes. Every evening he spent three hours in the library before dinner. Then after dinner, he studied on his bed for another couple of hours until he went to sleep. Who on earth would want to be with him?

"You are sick Alok," Ryan said, "you are just one sick person."

"My grades are important to me. My future is important to me. Does that make me sick?"

I went to Alok and put my arm around his shoulder; kind of felt he needed comfort during insanity. "C'mon Alok, we can study more..."

"Stop c'mon-Aloking me, will you?" Alok pushed my arm away, voice all wobbly. "Enough is enough," he said, his face contorted exactly like his mother's.

This heredity factor fascinated me; was there a how-to-cry gene? Or was this something he had picked up while growing up? Maybe Alok's family all cried together sometimes; mother, sister and himself bawling away with his father, who could still produce tears from one eye.

"You don't understand that I have responsibilities. I have to do well to support my family. Half my mother's salary goes for my father's medicine. She has not bought a new sari for herself in five years," Alok said as he choked on his tears. He needed to blow his nose.

Ryan sat down to watch Alok, intrigued. He could take 'fuck you's' ten a minute, but crying was a different game altogether. And the whole one-saree-in-five-years was tough to argue against. I mean, how do you argue with that? How many sarees a year is reasonable? I don't know, and Ryan for sure had no damn clue.

"And my sister needs to be married," Alok went on, "everyone is counting on me. And you guys don't understand. Ryan wants to play chess, see TV, enjoy his years. I hate enjoyment."

"Will it make it better if I say sorry? I mean, you aren't making any sense. And this whole parents deal – you know I don't understand that." Ryan was gentling, I could see.

But this shifted Alok into higher gear. "Of course, you don't. How could you? You never had them."

"I had them. I mean I still have them. But I don't sit and cry for them."

"Because you don't love them."

"Yes I don't. But at least I am not crying like a baby."

"Shut up!" Alok screamed and continued crying.

"You are a baby. A sissy-fat baby. Sorry sissy baby, now wipe your nose," Ryan said and started laughing. It is something he always does when he can't think of anything else, a kind of conversation filler.

"Shut up you...you..." Alok said.

"I want my mummeeeeee," Ryan said, imitating Alok's choked tones.

"...shut up, you abandoned orphan!"

Silence. Yes, sometimes people say something so messed up that all bets go off. Ryan's laughter vanished in a nanosecond. I sat up straight, confused if I'd heard right. Even Alok noticed the change in expressions and froze. Twenty solid, slow and long seconds of silence followed.

"Orphan. Hari, he called me an orphan," Ryan said.

I stayed silent. Alok stayed silent.

"Just get out. Go to Venkat or whichever prick you want to be with. Just get lost," Ryan said.

"I don't need you to tell me. Hari?" Alok said, not crying anymore.

"Yes?" I said.

"You coming with me?"

"Where?"

"Do you want to be with me or Ryan?"

This was so damn unfair. I had nothing to do with all this. Yet, I had to now choose between my friends.

"Yes, go with this loser Hari, go hold his hand."

"I am not going anywhere," I said.

"So you choose Ryan," Alok said in defeated tones.

"I am not choosing anyone. You are the one who is leaving. Do whatever you want," I said, disgusted with both of them.

There were no more words. Alok got up and left. Ryan shut the door behind him as hard as he could. It was purely symbolic, as we never shut the door in our rooms.

"You saw what he did. And he expected you to go with him, ha!" Ryan said.

"Fuck you," I said.

I met Neha soon after, though I was getting sick of the ice-cream parlour, and of the sickeningly sweet strawberry flavour. Neha still looked beautiful as hell, but I didn't feel like talking to her. In fact, I did not feel like talking to anyone.

"What's wrong?"

"Who said anything was wrong?" I said. I can be quite a prick if I want.

"It is all over your face. Now are you going to tell me or what?"

That is the thing with girls. They are like half your size or something, but if they know you like them, they boss you around. Who the hell did she think she was?

"It is nothing."

She placed her hand over my arm and self-respecting nitwit that I am, I melted faster than the ice-cream; like the bad mood bugs running through me suddenly got Baygon-sprayed.

"Neha, those bloody Alok and Ryan."

"Language!"

"Sorry, I mean my friends, my best friends, they had this massive argument and now our group has split."

"What was the argument about?"

"About grades. Alok said it was Ryan's fault we did badly."

"Really, how badly?"

I told her about our five-pointer grades.

"Damn, did you say five-pointers?" she said.

"Language!" I said.

"Oh sorry. I mean that is kind of low by insti standards."

See that is the thing. Once you get a GPA in IIT, everyone has an opinion about it, about you, even if it's a fashion design student.

"I know," I said, "but that is not what I am upset about. It is this place. I hate it."

Neha started laughing. I told you, didn't I, she can be a bit loony at times. "What is there to laugh about?" I asked, irritated.

"Nothing. Just how people would die to get in here."

"I know," I said, "but it sucks. I have tons to study, my grades are crap, and I don't have friends anymore."

"So Alok wants to mug, and he goes to the mugger," she paraphrased the recent events after I had told her the longhand version, "but how come you chose Ryan?"

"I didn't choose, Alok left," I reminded her.

"What are you going to do?"

I shrugged.

"You know my dad was a 10 when he was a student."

"He was a student?" I had never thought of Cherian as anything less in size or years.

"Yes, a class topper. Guess he wouldn't be too happy to know I am with a five-pointer," she said happily.

"So now you also want to stop talking to me," I said.

"No silly. I am joking," she said and laughed. Why does she do this all the time, tell jokes that are funny to her alone?