

"Whatever."

"Come here," she said, tapping the seat next to her in the parlour.

"Why?"

"Just come here."

Like a trained pet, I got up from the seat opposite and sat next to her; pretty girls have this power to turn Mary, making lambs out of people.

She held my hand and turned her face toward me. "I like this five pointer," she said, and kissed my cheek.

"One, two, three, four, five," she listed, smacking my right cheek each time. "See, now that isn't too bad."

Damn, I was melting again. "Can I kiss you back?"

"No, I don't have a GPA," she pointed out.

I loved people who did not have a GPA. I loved anyone who was not at IIT. I did not want to go back. I wondered if I could work at the ice-cream parlour, filling cones all day and never have to worry about classes, courses, grades, and Alok-Ryan arguments.

"Let's see a movie, how about Saturday next?" she asked.

"Sure," I said, snapping out of my fantasy of working in the parlour.

"Great. Gotta go now. I'll pick you up from this parlour at two. Matinee show," she said and left.

I waited for five minutes, read the list of five daily specials and thought about the five kisses. Somehow, it made up for my five-point GPA.

How I wished I had got a higher GPA, if only to get more of those ice-creamy kisses!

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Alok Speaks

*F*ATSO, CRY-BABY, MUGGER, TRAITOR, SISSY, THAT IS HOW I come across to you. You probably picture me as this boy who refuses to grow up, the perennial prodigy who wants to show his good report card to his parents year after year. You are free to judge me, my whining over grades, my splitting with the group, my reticence to cut apron strings, an umbilical cord that stretches out across Delhi all the way from Rohini Colony to the IIT campus, binding me to mother.

Allow me, however, to tell you this my way, for yes, this is Alok Gupta, and His Highness Hari has given me an itsy-bitsy space here to give vent to my feelings. But before I do that, let me tell you a story.

Once upon a time, there lived a boy in a lower-middle class home in one of the suburbs of Delhi. Let us call this boy Loser – just to make it easier – whose father and mother were

schoolteachers, art and biology respectively. Loser grew up in a simple home filled with notebooks and canvases, and learnt how to draw before learning to tie his shoelaces. Loser was good in studies (owing to two teachers looking over him at home), but what he loved most was to paint. Loser took part in every art competition for his age, and won most of them. The prizes kept coming in – and dozens of painting sets, calligraphy sets and stationery coupons later, it was clear Loser was above average at the easel. He wanted to be an artist when he grew up, and of course, this was a silly dream. For in India, there is only room for one or maybe two artists who are ninety years old (or better still, dead) to survive. Yet Loser did not care, he knew he would make it and nothing could stop him from his goal.

But that is when life screws you. Right at moments when you feel you have got it all figured out. Loser's father got this prestigious mural painting job, which for once paid well. The job involved painting the ceiling of the lobby in the education department building. Murals are hard anyway, and painting a ceiling is excruciating work. They put these bamboos upon which the artist lies down and works, and hopes to create that one masterpiece that will make the world crane their necks and take notice.

However, the only time people noticed Loser's father was when he fell down from the bamboo structure, ten meters down, and that was to step out of his way lest they broke his fall.

Right side paralysis, doctors said. Half of Loser's father was gone, but more importantly, the whole of his salary was gone, the right hand that painted was gone and so was Loser's dream.

Loser's father came home bed-ridden and never left it for ten years. His one good eye shed tears every now and then, and the sorrow of never painting again brought one infection after the other.

Soon, the bottles of paint were swapped with bottles of medicine. There was no money to afford a nurse, and Loser was appointed one. He was in class seven then, and for the rest of his school years he sat next to his father's bed after school.

For a while he painted, but soon he realized the family needed money more than landscapes. IIT, the one college in the country that virtually guaranteed a future, caught his eye. Yes, to become an engineer was the only way out of poverty.

Loser's mother used to cry every night. But she could not give up. She had to keep on teaching the digestive system and the endocrine system and reproductive system year after year to go on.

"One day, they will be out of this," Loser vowed to himself as he helped his father change sides at night and studied pulleys, magnetism and calculus for the IIT entrance exam. For two years, Loser did not step out of the house apart from school, gained fifteen kilos and muttered calculations while wiping bed-sores.

And one fine day he made it. He was in the IIT. How happy his mother and half-a-father were. Yes, four more years of discipline and he could emancipate everyone. That is when he met Ryan and Hari. And then, to remain with them, he screwed up his grades to the lowest in the institute.

Ryan, the man who lives for the moment, who does not want to be like him? Rich parents, good looks, smart enough to get into IIT, athletic enough to be good in sports and fun

enough to always attract friends. Ryan is infectious, and Hari is a perfect example of this infection. If Ryan wants something, Hari gives it to him. So, if Ryan does not want to study, Hari will close his books. If Ryan thinks GPAs are not important, then Hari stops caring about them. Ryan is Pied Piper....

I remember when he came home once, he lifted my father to carry him out, and kept holding him even in the auto. It was he who argued with the hospital staff to get us a good bed, and then stayed with us until three a.m. Yes, Ryan is good, he is very, very good. For who would have broken Coke bottles for unknown freshers? Or who would have screwed up his new scooter and overloaded it with three people, two of them in possession of large butts?

But there is more to Ryan. Like did you know his parents send him a letter every other week? Or that he never replies to any of them? Yes, he will tell you he doesn't love them or whatever crap he dishes out. But the truth is, he keeps every letter neatly in a file. When he is alone in his room at night, he opens the letters and reads them again. I mean, if he is so cool and everything, why can't he respond to them occasionally? And why does he keep re-reading those letters anyway? I always knew Ryan had issues but Hari is blind.

See, even though I think I have figured out Ryan somewhat, I cannot for the hell of it understand Hari. I mean, he really is like me – ordinary, unattractive, fat and dull. But he wants to be somebody else – someone cool, smart and sharp like Ryan. But deep down, he knows that this is not possible. He will always remain the under-confident kid who turns corpse during viva. The uncool cannot become cool. If only he'd

accept that, he would be able to think straight. But he doesn't, and so went along with Operation Pendulum.

When I first split up with them, I was really not sure if I had done the right thing. But after Operation Pendulum, I am not sure if I should have ever come back. Well, that is life. It screws you right when you think you have figured it out.