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One Year Later

I KNEW 365 DAYS HAD PASSED SINCE ALOK LEFT US BECAUSE third semester results had just come out that day. How irrelevant they seemed now; another five point something, another tattoo stamped on your worth as an individual in IIT society. Ryan and I had gone to the insti to see the results, but that was incidental, the real reason was to chill out on the insti roof.

I don't remember when we first discovered this roof, it must have been soon after we started smoking grass, which was soon after we had started vodka, which was soon after we had started listening to Pink Floyd. Floyd, vodka, grass and the insti roof; finally, we were on to what really mattered in life, the stuff that made IIT life bearable, especially when you were a five-point something.

The giant insti building had nine stories; one had to take the clandestine service stairs on the ninth floor to get to the

roof. There was an old lock guarding the entrance to the terrace, but thankfully the bolt was even more ancient. It took Ryan three minutes with a screwdriver to remove the rusted bolt and then we were on cloud nine, the highest point on campus. The bare, rough concrete surface made up the flat patch of terrace, there was no parapet. It was mostly empty, too, apart from the insti-bell tower, and a few dish antennas that helped the computer and telecom networks. After dark, only the stars above were visible. If one stood up and looked down, one could see the street lights on campus roads and distant views of Kumaon and other hostels a kilometre away.

Ryan laid out the vodka, the joints and his small Walkman in autopilot, familiar with our twice a week routine.

We lay down on the concrete, still warm from the sunlight in the day. Ryan divided the pair of earphones, such that we had one earphone each, passed a joint to me, and we kept the vodka bottle in the center. Sip, puff, sip, rewind, stop and play.

The lyrics washed over us and we flew up to the sky as it flew down at us.

"You see all those kids screaming over their GPA," Ryan said, releasing a smoke-ring.

I think smoke is beautiful; weightless and shapeless, it almost appears as deceptively powerless as the person releasing it, yet, it comes from within and rises above us all. Crap, I am talking all artsy stuff, grass does this to me.

"Yes, I saw them. And I see how they look at us," I said.

"How?"

"Like what the hell are we there for? How does our miserable GPA matter anyway? As if we are blocking their view or something."

"Screw them," Ryan said, words of wisdom from the man who knows everything.

"It's true though," I said, "we really serve no purpose here..."

"Of course, we do. We are the under-performers."

"So?"

"So we bring the average down. We make them look better. Hence, we bring happiness in their lives."

"Point," I conceded.

"But it is not the students that bother me. It is the profs."

"You are talking about the design class right?"

"Yes, that Prof Bhatia. I mean you were there, right? I gave him some ideas on how one could design a suspension bridge and he got all excited. He told me to make a scale drawing and submit it, said he would give me a special internship project. Then he asked me my name and found out my GPA. So then he calls me and says to forget about the drawing and internship. Can you believe that scum?" Ryan said.

We had finished one joint each. Ryan sat up to make another one, crushing the grass and tobacco hard, as if it were Prof Bhatia's innards.

"Screw him," I passed the words of wisdom back to Ryan. We refilled our glasses, as it turned dark on the roof.

"Yes, screw all profs," Ryan said.

"Yeah. Though Prof Veera is all right." Prof Veera was our fluid mechanics professor.

"Yes, not him. Though I have heard the worst one is yet to come," Ryan said as he lit up the second joint.

"Who?" I debated whether I should smoke more. Ryan's tolerance was much higher and he could probably make a

wholesome meal out of dope but I knew I was getting trippy. For one thing, I felt I was feather-light; up here, it felt like I was floating above the world. Screw all profs, all students and all design assignments.

"Prof Cherian."

"Neha's dad?" I said, somewhat returning to my senses.

"Yes. They say he's a real terror. Like he is the head of the department, and is this total control freak with other profs and students."

I knew Neha's dad was a control freak, at least with his daughter. "Who told you?"

"It is well known, ask any senior. Anyway, for the record, Anurag told me."

"So when does the control freak teach us?"

"Next year. He takes third year courses," Ryan said.

"Next year, too far. Give me another joint."

There were still more than two years to leave this place. And the worst prof was yet to come. I deserved another joint.

"Here," Ryan said, passing me the crude cigarette. He was a good pal, one who rolls joints for you.

"Anyway, I don't want to talk about grades or profs. Talk about something else," I said.

Ryan stayed silent; I guess he was searching for another topic.

"How is your girl?" he asked after straining his brain for twenty seconds.

That is how Ryan addresses Neha. He never says her name, as if her being 'my girl' is more important than her being Neha.

"Neha is great. Going for a movie next week."

"So you guys serious?"

"Serious about what?"

"I don't know, like you love her and everything?"

"I don't know," I said.

That is how men talk about their relationships. Nobody knows anything – neither the questioner nor the answerer.

"Has she said anything?"

"Well, you know how she is. So damn moody all the time. Sometimes she is all cuddly, holds my hand, and acts cozy at the movies. But when I try something, she stops me and gives me these lectures on how she is a decent girl and I should learn to behave."

"What do you do? You are a bastard I know," Ryan said and started laughing. Screw him. That is the thing with people who know you well, they judge you before they hear you out.

"I do nothing. Like I mean, do you know we have not even kissed yet. Like I have met her twenty times, but every time I get the push. She has like this under-the-elbow policy."

"Sounds like a nice girl. You're lucky."

"Screw nice. I don't want nice."

That is true, nice people are completely boring. They don't give you joints, and they don't let you kiss them.

"Talk to her then. Tell her to be naughty. I am sure she wants to be bad," Ryan said.

"Are you crazy? She is a girl; girls never want to be bad."

"They do. Just that they want it a little less than us."

I couldn't imagine Neha wanting to do the same things I wanted to do with her. "I don't believe you. Did you ever have a girlfriend?" I said.

"Then don't believe. Anyway, enough talk about women. Time for another drink and tape," Ryan said.

Ryan never talked much about himself. Sometimes, I wondered if he was gay. But he wasn't, I mean, I would have known. I practically lived with the guy, and unless he found me hideously unattractive, I think I would have known. But he wasn't gay, for he did notice the heroines in movies, whistled at pretty girls on the street. Maybe he just wasn't in the mood for women most of the time.

He changed the tape and put on another Pink Floyd. I saw the levels of the vodka bottle drop and Ryan scraping through his brown bag for the last joint of the day. A half-moon lit up the sky, and bright little stars looked smug, winking down at us like students with higher GPAs.

You know the thing about Floyd? Not only are they damn good, they sound better with every drink, like the singers designed them for alcohol. Like samosas-chutney, idli-sambhar or rajma-chawal, Floyd and vodka are in a combo-class of their own.

"You know what today reminds me of?" Ryan said.

"What?"

"The first sem results. You remember?"

"Yes, I do. The first fiver."

"And after that."

"What?"

"Fatso left us."

Ryan still referred to him as Fatso and even though it is derogatory, it was always laced with indulgence. I know Ryan had not spoken to Alok for the entire past year and he wouldn't let me as well. "Don't go to him. He left us," he said, and I knew Ryan would do some serious sulking if I rebelled.

"How come you thought of Alok today?" I asked, rising to see how much vodka remained. Surely, Ryan had drunk too much to be talking this.

"I just mentioned him today. I think of him more often."

Ryan in a profound mood. Grass and vodka have mixed to optimal levels.

"Screw him," I said as the song reached some of my favourite lines.

"What do you think he is doing right now?" Ryan said.

"Who?" I said, "Alok?"

Ryan nodded.

"Probably mugging away with Venkat. I hear he is a six-pointer now," I said.

"You know Hari, Alok did the right thing."

"Yeah, right."

"No, I am serious. You should have left me too. I am not good for you."

Now what is going on here, I thought. Am I going to have to waste real good dope in making Ryan feel all wanted and better about himself? I have two options: one, to tell him to shut up and enjoy the song, two, do what he wants me to do.

"What is the deal Ryan? Not feeling good?"

"No, I am fine. You should have left me. Everyone leaves me. They must be right."

"What?"

"They do. Dad, Mom, Alok...they all do."

"No need to be senti, Ryan, just enjoy the evening."

"You think Fatso was right? You think I did not care for him?" he demanded.

I hate it when people want to be assured, you have no choice but to play ball.

"No Ryan, Alok was wrong. He will realize it someday. Now just close your eyes and cruise a little," I advised.

I closed my eyes. The grass and vodka were now in complete control of the policeman in me, making me see what I wanted to see. I saw Neha sitting next to me, smiling and embracing me. Her hair, and especially that one soft, floppy lock, brushes me. Her round faces resembles the moon, or is it that I am actually watching the moon? This is trippy and the grass is getting the better of me but I want to be gotten the better of. I continued drifting until Ryan interrupted me.

"You know the best thing about the insti roof?" He stood up, towering over me.

"That no one knows we are here."

"No. The fact that you always have an option."

"What option."

"You can jump over the edge and end it all."

"Shut up, Ryan." I struggled to sit up.

"I'm serious. They can do whatever, but I can still control my options."

"You are too drunk Ryan, I want to go back," I said, sobering up fast. Sometimes, you want your commonsense to get the better of you.

We never missed the fluid mechanics class in the fourth sem and the reason was Prof Veera. That and the fact that the class was at noon and we finally woke up by then. Prof Veera was completely different. For one, he was like twenty years younger

than other profs. No more than thirty, he dressed in jeans and T-shirt, which bore his US university logos. He had like five degrees from all the top universities – MIT, Cornell, Princeton etc, and T-shirts from all of them. He carried this CD-man with him, and after class, he would plug it into his ears before he left. Students said Prof Veera had just joined the insti, and was not supposed to be taking a full course so early. However, the prof he was assisting had a heart attack or something, and Prof Veera had to teach us.

"Hi everyone," Prof Veera said as he entered class. He offered chewing gum to the first row students. The front row guys were all mugging nine-pointers, and freaked out at his offer. They declined, and he shrugged and popped a piece in his mouth and turned to the board.

"Turbulent flows," he wrote in big letters on the board.

"Guys, in the first five lectures, we studied simple flows called laminar flows. The shape and direction of these flows are predictable with the help of formulas and equations. You know which equation, right?"

He looked around for answers. Unlike other profs, he did not stick to the first row. In fact, he scavenged at the back. "Okay, I am not going to ask the studious kids all the questions. I want to ask the cool dudes at the back."

Ryan and I were chronic backbenchers; out of sight, this was the most defensive position for the outcaste five-pointers, but Prof Veera did not care.

"Ryan, tell me, which is the first principle equation for laminar flows?"

"Sir, me?" Ryan said, surprised that a Prof would know his name.

"Yes you, Ryan. I know you know the answer."

"The Navier-Stokes equation."

"Right. You want to write it down for the class?"

Ryan ran up to the board and the nine-pointers in the front row smirked at a five-pointer contributing to class. The equation was right though; Ryan doesn't go up to the board unless he knows he's right.

"Perfect, thanks Ryan. By the way, was it you who wrote the impact of lubricant efficiency on scooter fuel consumption in your last term paper?"

"Well, yes sir."

"Is it true you actually tested the data on your scooter?"

"Yes I did, sir. Not accurately though."

"I like that," Prof Veera said, looking at the nine-pointers who were busy taking frantic notes like trained parrots. "I really like that."

Ryan came back to his seat. I could tell he loved fluid mechanics, and most of all, he loved Prof Veera. He never missed FluMech and he would do anything for Prof Veera. Others however – the testy design prof, the painfully dull solid mechanics prof and the assignment-maniac thermodynamics prof – were a different story. Ryan could cut up their guts with a lathe machine in the machining workshop given a chance.

I met Neha at Priya cinema a week after the FluMech class. I would have said I met my girlfriend but the damn problem was I was still not sure. I had known her for over a year, but she called me different things depending on her mood. First, I was just a friend. Then I was a good friend, then a friend who

was special, then really-really good and special friends or some such crap. For her, calling someone a boyfriend was a big thing. Her dad had made her promise that she would never have a boyfriend, and she wanted to keep it. Of course, it did not prevent her from watching movies with me hand in hand every two weeks for over a year.

"Late again?" she said. I must have been late by like two minutes.

"Had fluMech class. Prof Veera overshot time and we did not even realize it."

"Prof Veera is that young guy right?"

"Yes, you know him?"

"Not really. Dad mentions him. I think my dad hates him."

"Your dad sounds like a total..."

She raised her eyebrows.

"Let's go in. I don't want to miss the trailers."

The movie was *Total Recall*, another sci-fi action crap. That's the thing about English theatres in Delhi. They either show action or adult movies. I don't mind the latter except that you can't really take a girl to them. Especially these really nice and good-Indian-traditional girls like Neha. So, you have the choice of sci-fi action nonsense or a Hindi movie. No self-respecting girl will watch a Hindi movie on a date. Hence, there I was again, to watch Arnold flex his muscles and blow up planets.

"You like sci-fi," she said as she took her seat.

"I do," I said. What choice did I have anyway?

"Typical IIT engineer."

Yeah right. Typical IIT engineers, my girl, don't skip design class to watch stupid movies.

And then just when I thought it couldn't get worse, it did. Neha and I took our seats in the balcony (Rs 35/ticket, total rip-off) and waited for the trailers to begin. However, according to a new government regulation, the theatre had to screen a 'family planning documentary' first.

Okay, so India has this big population. So maybe people should just use some protection and we would have less new people. Simple enough, right? So you would think. Apparently, nobody wants to use contraception, so the government has to show people a more permanent way to not have kids.

The documentary began; a doctor in a government hospital introduced himself with a beatific smile. He was supposed to be your friend in family planning, though I think he was the angel of death, especially when he recommended one sure shot procedure – vasectomy.

The documentary showed this mill worker who had this idyllic home where he lived with his simple wife (who cooked all the time) and two kids. Then one day he sleeps and has a dream that he has six kids or something (obviously that would have taken a lot of screwing his wife, but they skipped all that). The kids need more food, education, toys and keep asking dad for more. But dad is tired from the mill job (not to mention the screwing) and breaks down. That is when our friend in family planning or angel of death appears.

The doctor had this portable flip-chart with a picture of the male anatomy. He opened it, and the whole theatre, especially the front rows, started hooting. (Theatres are the opposite of class lectures, the front row is where the action is.)

Anyway, so all this is going on when I am on my date. I had never approached the topic of sex (let alone controlling

sex) with Neha. But there he was, the angel of death, showing the exact location of the cuts so that the male organ came under control. I was embarrassed like every other man in the balcony.

Neha looked at me, noticing I was shifting around in my seat.

"You all right?"

"Don't you think this is too much? Why do they have show this indecent stuff?"

"What? It is educational."

"Yeah, right. I need that when I come to see a movie."

"Oh come on Hari. I actually think it is pretty funny."

The wife on screen listened carefully to the doctor and smiled at the prospect of sex without any consequences. I think the doctor and the wife had a thing going, but that was just my imagination.

To the relief of all, the documentary ended in like half an hour. The mill worker wakes up and realizes how he must control his family and signs his reproductive facilities away. Happy ending, smiling faces of wife and kids which turn into cartoons, and the inverted triangle of the population control department. 'Small Family Happy Family' was the last nugget of wisdom thrown at us before trigger-happy Arnold took over the screen.

Neha held my hand as the movie began. She had grown comfortable with doing this and I could not hope for anything more. I remembered my last conversation with Ryan. Could Neha also secretly want to do more than hold hands? Could I just ask her? Should I just make a bold move?

We went to Nirula's after the movie for a meal. "So, what is Prof Veera like, tell me," Neha said, cutting the pizza we ordered into equal-sized pieces. Girls love organizing food on a table.

"He is really different," I said. "Like he doesn't discriminate between nine-pointers and five-pointers. And he likes original thinking. Even his assignments push you to think more."

"Like how?"

"Like he gave a term paper asking students to think about an engineering problem linked to fluid mechanics. Most profs would have just said, 'do all the numericals at the end of Chapter 10' or something, but Prof Veera invites ideas."

"Sounds cool. Is he good looking?"

"I think so."

"Then I should try to see him. Maybe I'll ask dad to invite him home," she said and laughed.

A surge of jealousy rose within me. Somehow Prof Veera didn't seem so nice anymore. "Go to hell."

"Hey, are you getting jealous?"

"No, why should I get jealous? I'm not your boyfriend."

Neha laughed really hard. Jokes only she finds funny. Stupid woman, I feel like cutting off her cute lock of hair.

"I am just kidding, silly," she said. "In any case my dad will kill me for that. And he hates him anyway. But it is nice to see you all worked up."

"I'm not."

She held my hand, though she hadn't stopped laughing. What is so funny to women all the time? And why do I still find her so beautiful? And why the hell can't I kiss her?

She stopped laughing and got back her composure. "Sorry, Hari. Don't feel bad, you are my sweetest little special friend."

Now what is that? Another title for the fortnight?

She bent forward to kiss my cheek. Now is my chance, I thought. Give her the illusion that you don't care then as soon

as her mouth comes to the cheek, jerk once and move your lips there instead. This is the only way to kiss good Indian women, Ryan told me.

"What are you doing?" Neha pulled back.

I tried to look innocent.

"Were you trying to kiss me on the lips?"

"No."

"Hari, you know I am not into that."

Then what the hell are you into? Funny private jokes? Or your stuck-up father?

"Because this is wrong. This spoils everything. Because it feels wrong. You are not a girl, you won't understand."

Yes, I wanted to say, and you are not a guy, so you will not understand. So, should we just eat our pizza and go home? I didn't say anything. I had lost my chance, and right then even my desire. Besides, her face had turned sad. I didn't want her to be upset. Because we fixed our next date at the end of the meal. I didn't want to not fix the next date. "This pizza is good."

"You want to meet next Thursday?"

"Sure."

"I have to buy a gift for a friend's birthday. Will you come to Connaught Place with me?"

I agreed. I was sick of Priya and all the overpriced dating alternatives around it.

"Cool. I'll get the car, and pick you up from the ice-cream parlour," she said.

I scraped through the crumbs on the pizza plate without looking up.

"Venkat, I have certain responsibilities..." Alok said.

"But they aren't my problem are they? This is the third time this month. It is about time I stop listening to this sort of stuff," Venkat said, interrupting him.

It was a chilly February night. The noise came from inside Venkat's room. Ryan and I were in the corridor of our wing, returning from one of our visits to the canteen.

"Why are they talking so loudly?" Ryan said.

"I don't know. Normally muggu Venkat's room is pretty quiet."

Ryan put his ear on Venkat's door.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"Shh... I think they're having an argument."

"What do we have to do with it? Let's go," I said.

"Shh...come here," Ryan said.

At some level, even I was curious about the argument. *Was it a big one? What was it about?* I put my ear on the door, and every word could be heard loud and clear.

"Alok, this is too much. I mean, I have to study for ten hours a day to keep my GPA. The least I can expect is to count on my group partners," Venkat was saying.

"My dad has become unconscious. We are worried he may have had a stroke! Two calls have come from home..." Alok said.

"Listen, your mom always overplays your dad's illness. He will recover, how will your making a trip help?"

"I am the only man in the house Venkat. I want to go. Can't you take care of it this time?" "Actually, no. I have to study class notes for other subjects. I don't think you realize this, I mean how would you being a five-point something," Venkat said.

"Realize what?" Alok said.

"That I have to maintain *my* rank. The second guy in the department is only 0.03 behind me you know. Now should I finish this group assignment or read my notes?" Venkat said, or rather shouted.

"Bloody mugger," Ryan whispered in my ear. I signalled Ryan to keep quiet.

"Venkat you study all the time. Can't you just..." Alok said.

"I am a nine-pointer, *do you understand?* I have to maintain *my position!*" Venkat said, speaking more to remind himself than to tell Alok.

"But am I not your friend? You know I have to take care of my dad," Alok said, this time pleading more than protesting. "Enough!" Venkat said, "this assignment is worth ten percent. Alok, you can't go."

"Venkat please," Alok said, and voice started to sound like his mother's, which meant he was going to cry soon.

"This is too much, I am going in," Ryan said, kicking the door open. I would have tried to stop him, but Ryan acted in a nanosecond.

Alok was standing next to Venkat, who sat on the study chair. They turned toward us in surprise.

"What the..." Venkat said, "Ryan, what are you doing here?"

It was a valid question. What was a five-pointer doing in a nine-pointer's room? Venkat looked at Ryan as if a person searching for a bar had reached a temple.

"What's the problem?" Ryan said, completely ignoring Venkat.

I stood there silently, checking out Venkat's room. Apart from a bed and a few clothes, there were just books, books and more books.

"Ryan, it has got nothing to do with you," Alok said. I could tell he was shocked to see Ryan, yet somewhere deep down, like he felt his saviour was there.

The pathetic 'I-will-cry-any-moment' expression had vanished.

"I said, what's the problem?" Ryan said.

"I'll tell you what the problem is," Venkat said. "We have a Thermo assignment due tomorrow, and Alok and I are in the same group. It is ten percent. Yet, he wants to go home..."

"I am not off on some tour, Dad is really sick," Alok said.

"Do you want me to go?" Ryan asked.

I was left puzzled. One year of silence, and now this sudden offer of help.

Did Ryan really want to get back with Alok or was he just proving what a prick Venkat was?

"Huh? You? Where...home?" Alok said.

"Yes, I know where you live and I have taken your dad to the hospital before. I have a scooter too and will get there faster. Or, if you need to go, then I can help you finish the assignment, except I don't want to work with this mugger bastard friend of yours," said Ryan, stressing on the word 'friend'.

This was too much. Ryan was acting like a Mother Teresa for Alok. The person Alok had insulted and left, was today a cure-all fairy from heaven. I looked at Venkat, who looked like a younger version of any of the anally retentive profs in the institute. He had put enough oil in his hair to cook an entire Kumaon dinner, his forehead sported an ash-mark from his devout prayers. Yet, at that moment, it was Ryan who looked like an angel.

"Really?" Alok said.

"So I go then," Ryan said and stood up. Alok nodded and Ryan left the room.

We remained silent for a minute. Ryan had solved a problem that could save a sick man's life and offer a nine-point mugger a future. All with a scooter ride to Alok's home.

"Well, that settles it then. I'll leave you to do the thermal assignment," I said and stood up to leave the room.

"Wait," Alok said.

"What?" I said.

Alok walked out of the room with me. Wasting no time, Venkat took out the thermodynamics book, giving Alok a glance which meant 'come back soon'.

"Thanks," Alok said.

"Thank Ryan," I said.

"Yes, I will. Is he still mad at me?"

"Obviously not, or why would he have gone to your house?"

"But you know Ryan, he could do things for you and yet be mad at you."

"Yes, he can sulk. But what difference does it make. Just thank him later." I was getting irritated with Alok. I didn't think he had the right to say he knew Ryan anymore, certainly not as much as me. "Hari?" Alok said. "You think I can come back?" "Come back where?" I was bewildered. "You know, the three of us again." "Why? Venkat isn't working out for you?" "I didn't know what I was doing man. I want to move back." I couldn't believe my ears. The difference one year with an obnoxious nine-pointer can make! "You sure?"

"Yes, I am sure." Alok's voice was small.

And then, like sentimental fools, we hugged each other. I think Alok was dying for a cry and he shed a few tears that he always has spare. I was kind of mellow too, I'd never thought the three of us could be together again. I knew Ryan would do some drama, but finally he would agree. If he could spend hours taking care of Alok's half-dad, he certainly felt something for him. "Good. Welcome back then," I said.

"Yes. Right after this damn thermal assignment though," Alok said and we laughed together for the first time in over a year.