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The Mice Theory

PREDICTABLY, RYAN POUTED OVER PRODIGAL ALOK'S return but not for too long as it was kind of pointless. After Alok had shed yet more tears, we all bear-hugged and just like that we were back to being a group once again. Venkat's hissed curses we ignored happily because he had his books, but we had each other.

Ryan threw a party to mark the historical event. He did the arrangements himself and that included cleaning up his room — a Herculean task in itself given he had not disturbed the layers of dust with as much as a sneeze for several months.

"Why is he calling it the Mice Party though?" puzzled Alok.

"Don't know. He has this new theory that he is going to launch," I shrugged.

Ryan had banned us from venturing near his room before the party. I heard him shout "Fatso, buzz off" at least six times

at Alok. The guest list consisted of me, Alok, Sukhwinder, Anurag and Vaibhav, who lived in the last room on our floor and always had vodka in his room. To Ryan that meant he was good friend-material. However, I only later figured out the real criteria for the guest list; all the guests were in the five-point something range of scores, were underdogs and lived in the same wing. We all anxiously waited for ten o'clock for Mr Ryan to open his damn door.

"Come in, guys," Ryan called out after we had waited outside his room for like an hour, on the verge of going bananas.

We entered and it was dark, for Ryan had replaced the normal bulbs in the room with red ones so that a crimson hue spread over the study table, which now doubled as a bar. Ryan had laid out vodka and rum bottles, juice from the roadside vendor, coke from the canteen, lemons, ice, sugar and finally, joints for the guests. When ready-made joints are served, you know the host is someone who gives attention to detail.

That was not all. Nude women adorned the walls, posters extracted from US porn magazines, which made their way to Kumaon through ex-seniors in innocuous US university admission brochures via mail. Blondes, brunettes, red-heads, thin, voluptuous and petite, posed on Ryan's wall, uniformly wanton.

Alok stared at the posters, his mouth open as if a UFO had landed in his kitchen-sink. "These women are completely naked," he managed to gurggle eventually.

Thanks for the insight, Alok. His quality time with Venkat had made him miss out on a lot.

We all sat down on the floor in Ryan's room, where he had placed cushions for each guest. The first drinks, the customary

'cheers', the challenge to execute 'bottoms up' followed and Pink Floyd sang to us.

We finished the first drink soon and Ryan topped us up promptly, and then again. I knew the alcohol had reached my head when I reached out for the ready-to-smoke joints; I always ache for a smoke when three drinks buzz inside me.

Surd had his own way of being drunk, by becoming overtly affectionate, kind of spilling over on to others' drunken space. He sat next to Alok, putting his arm around his shoulder, occasionally squeezing, rubbing.

"Great party man. Alok, are you feeling happy-happy?" Surdy asked solicitously.

Alok nodded, delicately removed Surdy's arm and moved forward to speak. "So Ryan, what is the big theory that you are going to launch during this party?"

Ryan was sitting across us with Anurag and Vaibhav. "Let's have a good time first," he said.

"I am feeling very good man. Tell us," Surdy said and replaced his arm around Alok's shoulder.

"Yes, yes, tell us," Anurag and Vaibhav spoke in unison.

"Guys, my theory is called the Mice Theory. But before I tell you that, I need you all to answer one question."

"What question?" Anurag said.

"I want you to tell me exactly what you want from life."

"Yeah whatever," I said, "Just tell us your damn theory." I was familiar with Ryan's showman tactics. Besides, my brain had too much alcohol to answer deep questions.

"C'mon guys, work with me on this," Ryan said, "you will appreciate this much more if you think about your own life first. Just one question – what do you want in life? Think about it for two minutes."

We fell silent. Ryan took a commercial break from his theory and refilled everyone's drink. I was on drink number four and I had never felt more clueless about life. I watched everyone else think.

"Okay, enough time," Ryan said, "Surdy, what do you want?"

Surdy held Alok tighter and dragged him closer. Then he planted a kiss on Alok's mouth and whispered intimately to him, "Should I tell him?"

Alok determinedly extracted himself from the affectionate and inebriated grip again and nodded.

"I just want to reach the US. With my GPA, it's impossible, but just somehow, someplace, somewhere I don't know, I just want to be in the US of A," Surdy babbled.

Anurag muttered something about inventing a new computer language, and Vaibhav wanted to start his own business.

I could tell Ryan was not too interested in the others' life ambitions, yet he politely nodded to all of them. He wanted to hear from Alok and me.

Ryan nodded at Alok.

"Well, you know it," Alok said.

"Tell me again."

"I want to get a job in Delhi, so I can look after my parents and take care of our money problems."

"Really?" Ryan said, implying he did not find the response so convincing.

"Of course," Alok said robustly.

"Really?" Surdy said again, though more out of affection than anything else.

"You, Hari?" Ryan said.

"I don't know." I really did not know what I wanted in life. I had thought about the question. I did not want to have a five-point GPA, and I did not want to be fat and unattractive. I also did not want to get tongue-tied in the damn vivas every semester. I mean, I definitely knew what I did not want – as I had it all in that department. But knowing what I really wanted was difficult.

"Of course you know. Come on, be a sport," Ryan urged.

Sport, that is Ryan's word. Ryan is always a sport. And Ryan is always thin and attractive. And Ryan is always confident and carefree. I hated Ryan. Yet at that point I realized what I really wanted – I wanted to be Ryan.

"Nothing much," I said, as I tried to think of an answer. I surely could not tell everyone I wanted to be Ryan; after all, Ryan would never want to be someone else.

"Still, say something man. So we can hear the theory," Alok said.

"I want to be able to kiss my girlfriend, and kiss her any time I want. And even do more, like go all the way with her."

I still don't know why I said what I said. I mean, it was sort of true. Yeah, I did want to kiss Neha and everything, but I had wanted to say something different.

"Who is your girlfriend?" Surdy turned to me with interest.

"None of your business," Ryan said briskly.

"Anyway, tell us the theory now, sir," Alok said. Two drinks down, he did not mind Surdy's overtures that much anymore, settling down into the masculine embrace with a resigned look behind his glasses.

"Gentlemen," Ryan said, sitting on the bed. He was now above us all physically, showering our upturned heads with his

gospel knowledge. "Thank you for coming tonight. As I am sure you have figured out, you are the lowest GPA holders in our wing. We are, gentlemen, the underdogs. Cheers to the underdogs."

Though Ryan was shamelessly working us up, we felt special at being the failures in the IIT grading system, and held up our hands high to a big 'cheers'.

"And this IIT system is nothing but a mice race. It is not a rat race, mind you, as rats sound somewhat shrewd and clever. So it is not about that. It is about mindlessly running a race for four years, in every class, every assignment and every test. It is a race where profs judge you every ten steps, with a GPA stamped on you every semester. Profs who have no idea what science and learning are about. Yes, that is what I think of the profs. I mean, what have IITs given to this country? Name one invention in the last three decades."

Silence ran through the party crowd as Ryan's speech became serious. I hoped Ryan was really drunk, for there was no other excuse for such patronizing crap at a party.

"Anyway," Ryan continued, "screw the profs. Coming back, this system is an unfair race. If you are a mouse who thinks or pauses to make friends with other runners, or stops to figure out what you want to do in life, or drag baggage from the past," Ryan said, looking at Alok, "then you will be pushed behind. As we have been pushed behind by morons like Venkat."

Surdy blew a flying kiss. I guess that meant he approved.

"But we can change all that," Ryan said.

"How?" Anurag said. At least someone was listening to this trash.

"By living on our own terms. By being rats, not mice, work together and beat the system. I will not give up my friends for this system. In fact, my friendships will beat the system."

"How?" Anurag said again.

"That is for me and my close friends. You only get the theory, I did not say you get the practicals."

"We are not your friends?" Surdy asked, his tone dipping emotionally.

"Of course you are. But I can only do this with my close friends."

No one else protested. If nothing else, Ryan's theory formed core entertainment at the party. One vodka bottle, ten joints and three cassettes of Floyd later, the speech was just part of the evening. At one a.m. the others left. Alok and I helped Ryan clear the mess.

"That was a good party," Alok said.

"I know, Fatso. You missed out on all this with the bastard Venkat," Ryan said, and staggered to his feet.

"So, what is with the implementation of the theory? How does that work?" I spoke idly.

"C2D," Ryan said.

"What the hell is that?" It sounded like a code in those damn sci-fi movies.

"Cooperate," Ryan said and fell on his bed, only half-intentionally.

"Cooperate?"

"Yes, Cooperate to dominate, C2D..." Ryan said and closed his eyes. All that work for the party and the vodka had taken their toll. He had passed out.

"Come, fellow mouse, let's go to our room," Alok said.

The party was over.

I was in the machining lab with Ryan when I remembered my date with Neha the next day. This time, madam had asked for a gift. She made this whole big deal about how I actually never give her anything, and how other girls got gifts from their friends. I mean, it was asinine logic if you ask me, as there were things she could be giving *me*, and without much capital investment. To have the nerve to ask for a gift on top of this deprivation is something only a woman can do, as they are made differently after all. Anyway, I'd promised her I would not come without a gift and then had totally forgotten about it.

"Tomorrow morning?" Ryan said "How will you get a gift by then?"

"I don't know, I just forgot. Man, will she sulk! I'll just buy some chocolates, bloody expensive they are though."

"Yeah, but chocolates? That is not original at all. No wonder she doesn't give you any," Ryan said.

"Well whatever. You have any bright ideas?" I was irritated at his conclusions, which were probably right.

"Think man, think."

We thought for several minutes and threw out most ideas; clothes too expensive, perfumes too frivolous, books impersonal and so on. I had neither time nor taste to improvise.

"Make something for her." Ryan snapped his fingers.

"What?"

"Like, make an object right here, in the lab. A handmade original, from an engineer, how neat is that?"

It seemed like an interesting idea, even though completely impractical. And what if she was expecting me to spend some money.

"Make what?"

"I don't know. Think of some simple device she could use."

I tried to think of Neha's life. She had this big purse full of things. "How about a little box to keep her lipsticks? They kind of keep rolling out of her purse when she takes things out."

"Now you are thinking customer needs. Ok, lipstick box. How many lipsticks max?"

"Three...four."

"And size of a lipstick?"

"No idea. Say three inches by one inch by one inch."

"Cool. So, say we stack them two by two...and then we design with sheet metal of thickness..."

I saw Ryan transform from the irreverent IIT underdog he purported to be into this passionate scientist over my stupid lipstick box. For the first time ever, he pored over an engineering drawing like he really wanted to make one. He thought of other clever things, a snap-up lid, a little mirror, and her name etched on top.

After the designing, he broke up the task into various parts; cutting, bending, buffing – all concepts we found boring as hell in class were now suddenly interesting. We forgot about the actual assignment for the day, as we gave a damn about our grades anyway.

Three hours later, I etched out the last few letters of 'Neha Cherian' on her made-in-IIT lipstick box.

"This is pretty neat," I said, impressed at the snap-open mechanism, "she will love this. Thanks, Ryan."

"Any time man," he raised his thumb. Yes, I really wanted to be like Ryan, who I loved most of the time. At least I hated him less than myself.

I presented Neha's gift to her at our ice-cream parlour.

"What? What did you say this is?" She twisted the metallic cigarette box-sized case round and round in her hands.

"It is a lipstick holder," I said.

"Really? Never heard of them."

I asked her for her lipsticks. She had five, which meant our design was below capacity. Anyway, I took four – red, copper, brown and pink (why girls put coloured wax on their bodies continues to be a mystery to me) and placed them inside. Snug fit, snap cover – the design worked perfectly. One surface had a mirror, so the user could apply the coloured wax accurately and not paint their nostrils in the bargain.

"Why lipstick case?"

"I don't know. I like your lips I guess," I said.

"Very funny. And you made this?" she said.

"Yes, with Ryan. See, it is personalized." I turned the box to its lower surface. 'Neha Cherian', the most beautiful name in the world was written in the most beautiful letters.

"Wow," Neha said softly, and then fondled the lipstick holder from the IIT Delhi machining lab like it was a newborn baby. "Wow," she said again.

"What?" I said. (Okay, so I was fishing for a little more appreciation here than the monosyllabic 'wow'.)

"No one has done anything like this for me," Neha said.

And it was at this moment that by pure chance I came out with the right line. I don't know how it came to me, but it just did. "Well, no one has meant more to me in life."

Maybe it was not completely true. But it wasn't all lies either (and in any case, it is about saying the right thing to girls, who gives a damn if it is true or not. I am Hari, not Harishchandra).

"Really?" Neha asked.

"Yes."

"Thanks, Hari. See I am going to use it right now," she said.

I watched Neha's face as she applied her lipstick with the same concentration as Alok had when doing quanti problems. Girls are beautiful, let's face it, and life is quite, quite worthless without them.

"What time you got to go home?" I said.

"Say by nine," Neha said. "I told them I'm meeting girlfriends for dinner."

"Wow, pretty liberal of them," I said sarcastically.

"They know I was feeling down. Thinking of Samir again."

"Hey, you want me to take you to a secret place?" I said.

"Where?"

"The insti roof."

"What? Are you crazy. Right on top of the insti, as if there could be a worse place for going public!"

"There is no one there. Ryan and I have gone dozens of times. And the view from the bell tower is beautiful."

I could see Neha was excited about the roof. It took me a few minutes of persuasion, convincing her that no one would find out, as we could follow her standard 'five minutes apart' policy to walk up there.

"I'll go. But not today. It's close to nine. How about next time, and I'll cry for Samir the whole day so they let me go out until eleven."

I didn't really dig her idea of using her brother as a weapon to stay out late but her parents were certified weirdos and probably deserved such tactics.

"Next time meet me on the roof directly, at eight-thirty."

"Sure," she said, "you said it is safe, right?"

"Yes, trust me," I winked.

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Cooperate to Dominate

"HERE, ONE COPY FOR EACH OF YOU." RYAN HANDED OUT papers to us with the title: THE C2D PLAN.

I had forgotten about the C2D theory, but obviously Ryan hadn't. He had in fact been working on the official document. We were sitting at Sasi's and Alok was busy with his second plate of paranthas, when Ryan dished out his plan for the rest of our IIT stay.

"Whassit?" Alok's greasy fingertips left marks on the sheet, obviously needing a tissue more than an IIT plan. There was something about Alok with his food that was too intimate to be watched.

I read out the contents.

Cooperate to Dominate. The IIT system is unfair because:

1. It suppresses talent and individual spirit.
2. It extracts the best years of one's life from the country's brightest minds.