

11

The Gift

I AM A HORRIBLE PERSON ON THE INSIDE AND THIS I demonstrated while fitting in Alok for the morning classes, citing his practice of waking early during those Venkat days, laying on thickly the unreliability of Ryan and me for any sunrise job.

C2D was great, I found out, as I was responsible for only two courses in a semester. For the rest, Alok and Ryan gave me all the assignments (which I copied) and their notes (which I photocopied). I returned the favour in my courses. We now needed to spend only an hour or two a day in studies, leaving us with plenty of time for movies, scooter drives, restaurants, chess, scrabble, indoor cricket, sleep, squash (yes, Ryan was trying again) and of course, booze and grass. The first minors that semester were a breeze. We didn't like ace the class or anything, but our expectations were low – just maintaining our

five-point GPAS. It is amazing how happy one can be with low expectations of one's self.

I was in the design class one day, a course for which I was responsible. Ryan chose to attend the class with me. I think he believes he is like this great designer or something. Prof Vohra was teaching us.

"Class, note down this problem that I want you to do in the next fifteen minutes. Design a car jack to lift the chassis in case of flat tires etc. Do a simple sketch."

Prof Vohra was a portly man in his fifties, who had an unusually kind face for a Prof. Of course, nothing in his nature supported this. With six term papers a semester and a lethal red pen that crossed out one design submission after another, kind was hardly how you'd describe Prof Vohra.

It was my course, therefore my hand that had to sketch the car jack with Ryan merely having to copy it. Prof Vohra had taught us enough for us to execute at least a basic screw-type design. I had just begun to draw when Ryan said, "What? You are going to make the same damn thing like the rest?"

"Yes sir, I am not Thomas Edison," I said, "and this is my course so just shut up and copy it."

"I have another idea," Ryan said.

I wanted to tell Ryan to screw his other idea and copy my screw-jack. But I never say anything to Ryan, and he never listens to anyone anyway.

So Ryan drew this 'modified screw-jack', in which one did not manually have to open and raise the jack. A flat tire did not mean the engine had failed, he said, hence one could attach a motor on the traditional jack and hook it up to the car battery.

If one switched on the car ignition, the motor could derive power.

"What are you doing?" I said, worried about Ryan's sketches of the car battery, obviously irrelevant to the current task.

"You wait and see, the prof will love it," Ryan said.

I stuck to my traditional screw-jack like the rest of the class. The course was called Design, not Original Design after all.

Prof Vohra walked along the class rows, looking at the familiar designs that all his students drew year after year – the simple screw-jack. His stroll ended at our desk.

"What is this?" Prof Vohra said, twisting his head around to make sense of Ryan's unfamiliar drawing.

"Sir, this is a modified screw-jack," Ryan said, "It can be attached to the car's battery...."

"Is this an electrical engineering class?"

"No sir but the end need is the same..."

"Is this an internal combustion engines class?"

"Sir but..."

"If you don't want to be in my class or follow my course, you may leave."

Prof Vohra's face no longer looked kind. If only Ryan had kept quiet, he would have moved on.

"Sir, this is a new design," Ryan said, as if it was not painfully obvious.

"Really? And who told you to do that?"

Ryan did not answer, just lifted his assignment sheet. Then in one stroke, he ripped it apart in two pieces.

"There, it is useless now," Ryan said.

Prof Vohra's face contorted and turned red, "Don't act smart in my class."

"Sorry sir," I said, though it was not for me to say it.

But it broke the tension. The prof and Ryan looked at me via the corners of their respective eyes. Prof Vohra exhaled and moved on; Ryan sat down.

"That wasn't very smart. You know he can flunk you," I said to Ryan after class.

"I don't care. I can't wait to get out of this stupid place man," he said, kicking the scooter stand as if it was Prof Vohra's face.

It wasn't Ryan's course anyway and he did not attend any further classes in design. He directly copied answers of my assignments mindlessly, and never as much as looked at the question-sheet. Yes, our greatest designer gave up.

The three of us were in our common study room one day, copying Alok's thermal science assignment.

"So, Prof Vohra is mad at you now," Alok said.

Ryan kept silent.

"Of course he would be. You should have seen his face," I contributed.

Alok laughed, shaking his head.

"He can flunk me for all I care," Ryan stated.

"That is not the point," Alok began.

"Fatso, you won't get the point, so give up. By the way, Prof Veera called me to talk about my lubricant assignment."

"Really?" Alok and I said in unison, wondering if Prof Veera had caught us cheating.

"Nothing to worry guys. I gave him a separate paper. It wasn't a class assignment."

"You have time to do separate papers?" I said.

"I have time to do what I want. I had thoughts on doing some experiments with various substance mixtures to check lubricant efficiency in a scooter engine."

"Where?" I said.

"Well, ideally in the fluid mechanics lab. But then we need a scooter engine, and a small budget to buy materials. Until then, I tried a few tests on my scooter."

"Wow, you're screwing your scooter up. How will we travel?" I said.

"It is for science. I might be on to something. Anyway, I combined different types of oils to check mileage. I think I can beat normal lubes by ten percent."

I have to say, I was impressed with Ryan. Against all odds, this man was working to reduce our petrol bill. I thought of all the extra *paranthas* we could buy with a ten percent lower fuel cost.

"So, what did Prof Veera call you for?" Alok said.

"He said he'd help me get the institute's permission to use the lab and get some research grant."

"Wow! You will be a scholar man," Alok said.

"Yeah whatever," Ryan shrugged, "It is not that easy. One has to submit a proposal to Prof Cherian, detailing budgets, benefits, timing and all that crap, then a committee decides. It takes months."

"But if you do get it..." Alok blinked rapidly, "so neat man."

"I have to work hard on the proposal over the next few weeks. Don't worry, I'll do my courses, but no partying or movies," Ryan said.

Now, if Alok had said the same thing, Ryan would have blown a fuse. But this was Ryan, and we never said anything to him. Besides, I was kind of glad he was into something sensible.

"Sure, we'll tell you what you missed," I said and winked at Alok.

"Yeah, though that makes you the mugger now," Alok said.

"I am not a mugger. You are the mugger, Venkat-boy," Ryan retorted.

I have to say, it was never my thing to visit Alok's house. Just the thought assailed me with medicine smells, crumbling concrete and cooking smells, topped by a middle-aged woman wailing at the drop of a hat. Yet, there I was one Saturday with Alok, if only because Ryan was busy with his do-not-disturb-me lube research proposal. It was depressing to see Ryan work so hard and he did like three night-outs one week in the computer centre and the library. On top of that, he spent his days in the fluid mechanics lab mixing lubes and then testing them on the scooter. I told him about this movie at Priya in which there were as many as six topless scenes and he only looked blankly at me. I tried luring him with new cocktail recipes, but Ryan stuck to six straight cups of coffee a night. Objectives, scoping, budgeting, applications, past research – each section in his proposal was like a million pages. He submitted drafts to Prof Veera, who almost always wanted Ryan to do more.

So when Alok asked me to his house for lunch I found myself agreeing if only for the food. I had learnt to ride now and Ryan's scooter was free that day (though Ryan did give us the task of noting down the kilometres back and forth).

Delhi roads are a nightmare and I couldn't dream of driving as fast as Ryan. Alok and I couldn't go beyond fifty, and Alok kept talking as I navigated the cows and the cops to the suburbs.

"You think Ryan will get the project?" Alok said, sitting pillion.

"I think so. His proposal alone is eighty pages, which I think is a project in itself. And I mean, it is original work."

"Yes, but you know he has to put a cover sheet on the proposal."

"So?"

"The cover sheet carries the student's name and GPA. You think they'll fund a five-point something?"

"Why not? They'll read the proposal and decide."

"They are profs," Alok said, "and you know how they think."

"Prof Veera is with him."

"Yeah, let's see."

We reached Alok's house in an hour. I kind of stopped breathing to skip the medicine smells. Of course, couldn't do without oxygen forever but luckily Alok's mom laid out the food soon.

"Alok, see I have made paneer for you and your friend," his mother said.

For a poor family, Alok's family ate quite well. I mean, there was rice, rotis, daal, gobi-aloo, mango chutney, *raita* and of course, *matar-paneer*. I guess that explained the corpulence running in the family.

"Eat *beta*, eat. Don't be shy," Alok's mother egged me on.

The food was delicious but the conversation tasteless. Alok's mother recounted her last week, which was full of problems. The funny thing was almost all her problems had one solution – more money. On Monday, the five-time-repaired geyser had broken down and there was no money for a new one. On Wednesday, the TV antenna took a toss and a new one was too expensive. The family had to live with grainy

reception until they could save some money. On Friday, Alok's father fell off the bed, which required a doctor to come home, another hundred bucks. There were other stories too – the ration shop had started charging double for sugar, and the maid had ditched twice that week.

"Ma, can you stop boring my friend," Alok said.

"No, it's fine," I said, reaching for more daal. Actually, the life Alok's mother led at home intrigued me. Somehow, her clutching her sari to wipe her tears had been the only image I had been stuck with for the past year but now I realized she had a life too. The challenges she faced were not quite lube research proposals, but pricey tomatoes nonetheless.

"And you know the sofa springs are coming out..." she was saying when Alok interrupted her.

"Mom, can you please keep quiet. I have come home after a month and that is all you have to tell me."

She looked surprised. "Who else will I tell my problems to? I have only one son."

"Enough mom," Alok said, his face turning red like an expensive tomato.

"I will keep quiet," Alok's mom agreed and started mumbling to herself as she ate her food, "earn for them, then work like a servant for them and then they don't even want to listen to you. Physics teacher Mrs Sharma tells me, these days sons forget their parents."

Clang, Alok threw his plate on the floor. Bits of lunch splattered all across the living room and he got up and left the room.

What was I supposed to do? Follow my friend, who had brought me here? Or sit and watch Alok's mother wipe her

tears with her sari? I decided to do none of the above, focusing on the *matar-paneer*. The food was good, that is what I came here for, I kept telling myself, looking intently at the plate.

Needless to say, it wasn't a happy visit home. Alok kind of cooled down, came back to the living room, and sat on the sofa. Alok's mother cried her stock of tears, and went in to get *kheer*.

"Alok, what are you doing man?"

"You stay out of this Hari. You won't understand."

Yeah right, I should stay out of this, I thought. But he was the one who had got me into this.

"She has made *kheer* and everything. What is your problem?"

"They are my problem. You won't understand, shut up and wait for the *kheer*."

We did wait for the *kheer*, which was perfect. I was sure that Alok's family could solve half their problems if they stuck to a more frugal diet but good food seemed vital to them, even at the cost of TV reception. It was their situation, so I stayed out of it until we were on our way back.

"I know what you are thinking," Alok said.

"What?"

"That how can I be so heartless."

The only thing I had thought about Alok's heart was that it would be under tremendous strain with such a fat-intensive diet.

"Nah, just haven't seen you like that," I said as I turned on the Munirka crossing, narrowly avoiding a peanut seller.

"That is all they talk to me about; problems, problems and more problems," Alok said, "and what can I bloody do about them?"

"Hmmm. That is true," I said, wondering if Alok was now telling me a problem I couldn't do anything about.

Vivas – the most hated, dreaded moments of my student life. I avoided them like I did cows on the road with their tails twitched up. But like the cattle in Delhi traffic, sometimes you just couldn't avoid running into them. And this one Wednesday was the design viva. It was my course under the C2D, and I was supposed to take the lead on all questions. I tried to convince Ryan and Alok to help me, but the bastards didn't care and had gone to sleep at ten the previous night, leaving me to mug through the night and prepare for all expected questions. It wasn't much use, for in my case it wasn't about knowing the answers.

"Hari, what makes C40 steel better than C20 steel for making rigid structures?"

More carbon in C40, hence harder steel, I thought. Also, probably cheaper in terms of costs. C20 was soft and could buckle. I knew the answer... if only Prof Vohra would stop looking me in the eye.

"Sir, C40 steel is..." I said as I looked back at Ryan and Alok to evoke some pity.

"Look at me Hari," Prof Vohra said, "I am asking *you*."

I didn't want to look at him, and I really wanted to get the answer out. But all I got out was fat drops of sweat, on my face, arms and hands.

Four tries and three different questions later, Prof Vohra gave up. Ryan shook his head and smiled, as if he'd known all

along that this would happen. Alok kept quiet, as he mentally calculated how many marks we had lost.

"Sorry guys," I said at dinner, "I let you down again. I hate vivas man."

The mess workers tossed rotis that you could make jeans out of; I tore one hard, hoping to relieve my tension.

"What happens to you?" Alok said.

"I don't know. Whenever someone asks me a question in a stressful situation, I can't say anything."

"Since when?" Alok said.

"Since high school," I said.

"Something happened?" Ryan said.

"No...I mean yeah, nothing," I said.

"What?" Alok said.

"Forget it. Pass the rice, I can't digest these rotis. They are like chewing gum," I said.

Neha's birthday was on December 1 and as usual I was clueless about what to get her.

"You have to make it special," Ryan said. We were skipping class and having lunch in the canteen.

"Special how? I have no cash. I can't even afford toothpaste right now," I said.

"You are not brushing your teeth?" Alok said, looking up.

"No man I'm using Ryan's," I said. "Anyway, come to the point Fatso, what should I do?"

"Think," Ryan said, knocking his head like he was solving a nuclear physics problem. He is a patronizing bastard, I tell you.

"I can't think of anything," I said. "No more 'make-your-own-gifts', did that with the lipstick box already, so it won't have the same effect. And I am so broke, I can't give her something expensive."

"How about something useful but cheap, like handkerchiefs?" Alok said.

"Shut up Alok," Ryan said.

I was glad he said it for me. Alok had as much of an idea of romantic gifts as his mother had about cabarets.

"Ryan, what should I do?" I was panicking.

"Well, it doesn't have to be expensive, as long as it's a surprise. Who doesn't like surprises?"

"Like what?" I said.

"Like being the first one to wish her," Ryan said.

Ryan's plan was quite original (and cheap); to break into her room, right through her window on the eve of her birthday. At midnight, I would be the first one to wish her and the surprise would sweep her off her feet (and hence eliminate the need for a real gift). It was a crazy idea, for we weren't just breaking into my girlfriend's house, but a prof's house, that too a head of the department no less. But Ryan made it seem easier than copying a thermodynamics assignment, and I agreed.

So, at eleven-thirty p.m. on a cold December night, Ryan, Alok and I quietly slipped out of Kumaon. Ryan drove us to the faculty housing complex and parked his scooter fifty meters from Neha's house. The entire lane was silent in contrast with Kumaon where the assignments and mugging had only just begun for the night. The profs slept blissfully, while their minions worked away through the night.

"Ryan, you sure we can handle this?" I asked one last time as we neared the lawns of Prof Cherian's house.

"Shhh... of course, we can, but if only you keep quiet," Ryan said as he lifted the latch off Cherian's gate.

Silence, apart from a gentle creaking of the gate as we entered the den of the beauty and the beast.

I looked up at Neha's window, imagining her sleeping peacefully, her beautiful face glowing in the dark. My heart quickened.

"Alok, come on you go first. On the pipe now," Ryan whispered.

"This is impossible," Alok said.

"I'll give you a push," Ryan said.

As he climbed up the flimsy steel pipe, he looked like a gorilla hanging onto a bamboo stick. There was serious risk of the pipe breaking, given his mass and the strength of galvanized steel (see, our engineering knowledge did amount to something), so we decided to wait until he reached the roof.

After Alok it was my turn, followed by Ryan, who shimmied up the pipe in seconds. Ten minutes to midnight, we were on Prof Cherian's roof.

It was pitch dark. Ryan finally switched on a flashlight and we tried to navigate through the water tanks and clothes left to dry on the roof.

"Where is her room?" Ryan whispered.

I pointed mutely and we moved toward the ledge.

"Here are the flowers," Ryan said as he pulled out a bunch of sunflowers from under his shirt.

"Where did you get these?" I said.

"Just now, from Cherian's garden."

"Are you crazy?" I said.

"Nice touch," Ryan said, "now get ready."

We knocked on Neha's window using some pebbles from the roof. Nothing happened at the first pebble, nothing on the second and third.

"It's not working, she probably sleeps too deeply," Alok said.

"Keep trying," Ryan said.

We kept throwing little pebbles like morons. Probably a million pebbles later, we had a reaction. The room light switched on, and the window became bright.

Climbing up a pipe was hard enough, but the next step was the real killer. I was supposed to dangle myself over the ledge, with Alok and Ryan holding my hands for emergency support. But first Neha had to open the window.

"Quick, say her name before she screams in fear," Ryan said.

"Neha, it's me," I said, not whispering for the first time in half an hour.

"Hari," Neha said as she opened her window, "What are you doing here?"

"I can explain. Let me come in first," I said, and sprung myself over.

"Are you crazy?" she said and rubbed her eyes even as my legs dangled in front of her face.

"Careful Ryan," I said.

"Who else is there?" Neha said, by now completely awake and completely in shock.

"No one... I mean only Ryan and Alok," I said as I swung myself inside the window.

"Careful," she said as I landed on some cushions on a rug, pretty and delicate as only in a girl's room.

I gave a thumbs-up signal to my friends and banged shut the window.

"Hari, what exactly do you think you are doing?" Neha said, "What if Dad wakes up?" She adjusted her hair as I noticed her nightclothes. She wore a sleeveless, simple cotton nightie with little blue triangles all over. As always, she looked beautiful.

"Happy birthday, Neha," I said, and took the flowers out from under my shirt.

The flowers were crushed and already wilted, but there is something about flowers and women. Somehow, seeing these reproductive tools of plant-life works wonders. It chills them out. Neha's anger vanished, and I could tell the idea had worked.

"Sunflowers," Neha said, "Where did you get these?"

"From your garden actually."

"What?" Neha said and threw a stem at me, "you loafer. Such a cheapo you are."

I took a cushion in response and threw it back at her. I was just getting excited about the impending flower and pillow fight when she nipped it in the bud.

"Don't mess with these cushions, I hand-painted the covers."

Hand-painting cushion covers, how can girls waste their time on such useless pursuits? I mean, Ryan and I didn't even have cushion covers, let alone painted ones.

"What are you thinking?" Neha said as she came close and held my hand.

"Nothing. And I'm sorry I startled you like that."

"It's okay, I like it," Neha said, "I guess it is kind of special. Come sit."

She made me to sit on her bed. I sat down as close to her as possible, my eyes drifting down to her chest. Girls don't wear bras at night I guess, which quite obviously suits them better. At the same time, I thought of the possibility of Prof Cherian walking in through the door.

"What are you thinking? Look into my eyes," Neha said.

"Huh...nothing. Happy birthday," I said.

"Aren't you going to kiss me?"

My eyes went wide as UFO saucers.

She drew back. "Wait a minute. You want to, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"So now?" she said.

"Now what?" I said.

"Are you going to kiss me or what?"

Maybe it was the flowers, or just the whole excitement of breaking in, or maybe even that she had finally grown up. I moved forward, and even though I had seen a million kisses in movies, I can't tell you how hard it is to deliver a good one the first time.

"Oops...not so hard," she said, "gentle, baby kisses first."

She led the path from there, and frankly, I was too excited and scared to do better. But I had my first kiss, right there in Prof Cherian's house.

"Shh...Daddy's got up for water," she said, pushing me away.

"Now what?"

"Nothing, he won't come up. But you should go now."

"I want to stay."

"Just go now," she said as she pushed me off the bed, in contrast to her loving looks moments ago.

It was pointless to insist. Besides, a part of me wanted to get the hell out of there before the gig was up.

"So, how was it?" Ryan said as I was pulled back on the roof.

"Nice. Very nice," I said with a big grin splitting my face which said it all.

Getting down was as much an art as climbing up, but the real problem was as we reached the lawns. Someone had switched on the living room light.

"How did the light go on?" Alok said.

"Don't know. I think Cherian woke up for water," I said.

"Let's crawl out," Ryan said as we bent under the window to be out of sight.

A bucket fell noisily as Alok crawled through the grass, loud enough to make all our whispers pointless.

"Who is it?" a male voice came from inside as we heard footsteps.

"Fuck, it's Cherian. Run, get the hell out of here," Ryan said.

We stopped with the slithery crawl and ran for our lives. If Cherian had seen us, he would have kicked our butts out of the college right then.

We were just outside the gates when the door opened and Cherian came out in what looked like his wife's nightgown.

"Who is it?" he shouted, adjusting his spectacles.

"Your father," Ryan yelled as we ran away from the house.

I don't know if Cherian chased us or was too scared to do so but the three of us did not stop running until we reached Ryan's scooter.

"Are you stupid or what? Why did you say that?" I reproved as we rode off.

"Yeah, right. I should have said, sir, it's only your son-in-law with some friends. He would've brought the drinks out then."