

Touched by an angel

- Aniket Samudra



PREFACE

Without hesitation, I would like to acknowledge all the efforts of my best friend Vikrant Deshmukh. This surely was not possible without him aside.

With all his motivation, encouragement, proof-reading, suggestions and constant feedback I managed to write down some of the memories that were almost buried inside. With the help of this book, I unleash and relive those moments, virtually.

Like my all other stories, I hope you will like this one too. I have changed the names of the characters and locations, though it is not a complete coincidence if you ever see someone with a similarity to this book.

~ Author - Aniket Samudra

1

“Are you mad?”, I shouted at Neha

“Come na Janu, please!!!”, Neha was still insisting

“NO, I’m not coming, and stop calling me Janu, it sounds very filmy”.

Although I liked Neha calling me *Janu*, I always pretended to dislike it, so that she will continue to call me by that.

“Ok baba, I won’t, but please, come with me. I already have committed my teachers that you will be there.”, Neha said

“But, why *me* jaar? Can’t you get somebody else for your stupid thesis?”

I was still not able to digest the thought of being in a girl’s college as an Object to some idiotic thesis of Psychology, where girls will ask me questions, will show me weird diagrams and pictures and I have to tell them what I see in those shapes. Based on my answers, class will write down their observations. The end result will be my psychological behavior.

This was some kind of activity that was planned in the coming week in Neha’s Psychology class and they wanted somebody who has never studied Psychology before and has never experienced such a stupid humiliation.

For me, or for that matter for any guy in the city, Neha’s girls college was like a cave of Alibaba. Everybody wanted to peep in, to see what *treasure* it held. 24 hrs a day, 7 days a week, you will see some guy standing near the college gate or around the girls’ hostel. On any other day, the idea of being in that college would have fascinated me. But, somehow being the *ONLY* man in that college was scary. I couldn’t digest the thought of being there and being questioned by the girls.

When you have a girl-friend, it doesn’t matter what you think or what you believe. You just have to obey.

It was difficult to say NO. She was pursuing since last 3 days now. I had few days off in the next week to compensate for the extra work done during the release and I had no other plans but to laze around, which according to Neha was a boring. She thought it would be good for me to spend time with her. And she was equally curious to know my psychology, by means of those practical (or should I say, she was eager to cross-check whether I am a psycho !!!!) The other obvious reason from girls point of view could be to show-off her boy-friend. Whatever be the reason, I couldn’t stick to my opinion. I gave in finally and agreed to attend the practical.

“Thanks Tarun for coming here ”, Neha said

“My pleasure”, I tried to smile, but couldn’t.

“You are looking handsome in this white shirt and blue jeans”, Neha tried to boost my confidence.

While we were talking, I noticed that I already had crossed the border-line of the gate and was inside the college premises. A cold wave of shiver passed through me. A group of 3-4 girls were staring at me. I thought, the moment we would be out of earshot, they would start commenting and start spreading the news in the college premises. By the time we crossed them, I was dead sure they were talking. I could sense their daunting stares on my back !!!!!

College was huge, constructed somewhere in 1935, but still looked solid. The premise looked clean. At least there were no empty cigarette packs, *gutkha* packets and litters. While we were walking towards the class, I saw two older ladies coming in our direction. It didn’t take a brainer to guess that they were teachers. Both of them had spectacles, neatly draped saree, no heavy make-up and expression less face. They were busy, discussing something. The eldest of them saw me first. She said something to the other lady who also looked at me.

With every step of them moving towards us, I could hear my increased heart-beats. I looked at Neha. She was cool.

While I was busy thinking, what will happen next, those two Ma’ms reached us.

The elder one, looking at me, asked Neha for her I-card. Neha produced the I-card . The lady was not at all interested in it, she was still enquiringly looking at me. If someone breaks the signal, traffic police catch him and asks him for his licence. Now tell me, is he really interested in looking at his license? No right? There was something else he is curious about. It was that kind of look, the other lady was having when I stared at her.

“Mam, he is Tarun, my friend.”

I thought, what if she had said, “*My Boy Friend*”. Would either of them took out a revolver in Rajanikant style and shoot me?

“He is here for the Psychology thesis practical that we are going to have. I already have the permission to bring him in.”, Neha continued with her blabbering, and two teachers continued to stare at me For no reason, I had that guilt conscious and hence I continued to look down at the floor.

“Whose class? “, this time the other Ma’m spoke.

“Desai Ma’m”, Neha replied with confidence.

Neha’s answer seems to pacify all their inquiries and both left us without any more fuss after that.

The curiosity among the girls was increasing with every inch I was moving in. I was trying to avoid direct eye contact with any of them but yet could feel their stares at me. I was kind of alien or outsider for them.

I wished Neha could hold my hand, so that I could feel safer.

Neha was pointing me to the buildings. "This is our Economics lab..... this is the hall for our extracurricular activities..... that is a school..... that one is auditorium and the building back there is for sports..... "

Couple of more steps we cruised in and I heard a loud shout from a group of girls. The next building was the girls' school building. The girls of division 6 or 7 had an lecture off and probably didn't have anything to do. Peeping outside their class window when they saw me, they started shouting "Dadaaa sss Dadaaa ssss"

I remembered last month, when we were out to a hill-station, a bunch of kids from our bus started shouting "monkey, monkey" /when they seized black faced monkey gang on the corner.

Was I a moneky for these school girls?

I was too ashamed to look at them, or to look anywhere for that matter.

Neha was laughing at this situation and I was furious at her.

"Let's go to the canteen and eat something first.", Neha said, showing me the way to the canteen. *Argh...girls' word was silent. She actually meant girls' canteen!!!*

Canteen was very noisy, as opposed to the deadly silent premise. It was buzzing with shouts, laughs, gossips and what not. When we went inside, the canteen lost its voice. Everybody were staring at me. Nobody moved, nobody said a word, pin-drop silence.

There was no space to sit or to stand. Neha asked me to wait outside, while she will go in and get something to eat. I was about to say something but it was too late. By that time Neha had already gone.

Canteen was again busy with its chirping.

I was alone and wanted to look around. I wanted to look at the beautiful faces around, I wanted to smile and make myself comfortable, but couldn't do either of it.

It was more than 5 minutes and Neha had still not come.

"Is there a big queue? Did she meet any of her friend? Is she busy talking? Does she remember that I am with her and waiting outside all alone, helpless, very much dependent on his girlfriend?"

I had no courage to go inside the canteen and search for Neha. It was already filled to capacity with girls of all standards and classes. So instead I thought taking a look inside from the nearby window to check on Neha. While I was doing that gutsy act, I heard a heavy voice, "Excuse me!!"

I turned around.

Now three middle aged woman, or might be Ma'ms with a group of 8-10 girls were staring at me. Girls were trying to hide behind them, yet were curious to look at me. I was wondering if any of these girls tipped the Ma'm about me.

"Yes?", I tried smiling.

"This is a girls' college and you are not supposed to be standing here. Who are you?", one of the Ma'm enquired.

I was scared to death. I could see couple of girls trying to hide their smile with their hands.

"Ma'm, my name is Tarun and I'm with Neha of second year. I am here to play an Object for Desai Ma'm's Psychology practical class"

I pronounced *Desai Ma'm*, with such an emphasis as if I am attending her class since my birth !!!.

I was also glad for the fact that I got to hear *Desai Ma'm's* name a couple of minutes back. That name eased some of the tension. All three of them were thinking what to ask next when Neha came out of the canteen. She looked at Mams and then at me. Then she passed the sandwich that she got from the canteen over to me and told the three teachers' again about the Psychology thesis story.

That satisfied them, and the group separated *in peace*.

"What took you so long?", I asked Neha.

"Are baba, there was lot of rush and the girls' also wanted to know why you are here? And then Ganesh bhaiya got a call from the principal office for some order.", Neha tried to calm me down.

"Ganesh Bhaiya? Who is this Ganesh Bhaiya?", I asked

"He is the canteen servant. His name is Ganesh, we call him Ganesh Bhaiya", Neha winked.

"You mean, is he a BOY?", a stupid question, I realized the moment I asked it.

"What yaar!... of-course he IS a BOY", Neha said.

"Wow, I want to meet him", I couldn't hold my curiosity.

"What for?", Neha tried to push me aside.

"Don't laugh, but I really want to see a man's face now, even if he is a servant from the canteen",

Although Neha laughed at it, I felt that I really meant it. It was no joke. I was terribly upset in this girls' college and I swore that this will be my first and last visit to any girls' college (Unless of course I'm the dad of a daughter who have to rush to school / college for her admissions !!!!)

Second Year Psychology class was overflowed by girls of different type, different attitudes and different personalities.

I was cursing Neha for what she has gotten me into.

We went into the class, and the class became quiet in no-time. It was like in school-days when the kids were shouting, fighting, jumping and then the Inspection auditor would break into the class with the headmaster.

All eyes on me. It might be exciting and heavenly for them to see a guy in the girls' college, but for me to be in a girls' college was like being in hell.

Neha introduced me to some of her class mates.

"This is Tarun...!"

"Hieeee Tarunnn..", girls yelled at me. Echoing the ending 'n' a bit long.

I thought of saying the ending 'n' in Tarun is not sooooooo long.

"... and this is Sheena...this is Radha, this is Rachita, this is Sonam..." the list was endless Neha continued to introduce and I kept forgetting the names-faces matching in no time.

Neha pointed me to a bench which was located at the corner of the class.

I quietly went there and sat. Some girls engaged themselves in usual talks, whereas some still continued to stare at me. Cell phones, those days were still a big-deal. Thanks to my highly paid I.T. job, that I was able to afford one, but it was too bulky to be showed-off. Hence I preferred to keep it, where it was.

I kept staring at the top of the bench as if some Hibru secret code was written on it, and if I don't solve it in next 10 minutes, I will be shot to death.

The sudden lowered noise forced me to look straight to the door to find out another middle aged lady coming inside the class with an authoritative look. I guessed she was Desai Ma'm.

I politely stood up, but to my surprise none of the girls did.

Well, that is what we do, right? We all stand up to respect the teacher in class. Don't we? Be it a boy's college or a mixed college. Not sure if this custom is followed in girls' college.

Whatever be the reason, I made fool of myself. Desai ma'm was also not used to this and she just stopped for a second, not knowing what am I going to do.

There was a sudden hushhh hush...in the class..

I sat down.

"Quiet!!", Desai mam said.

"Neha, can you introduce the object to us?" Desai Ma'm asked Neha.

“Object??, what yaar...I am a normal human being, doing a favor on you and all these girls around, just for the sake of my girl-friend...” I thought

“Yes Ma’m”, Neha said, as she stood up.

“Ma’m, this is Tarun.. my friend...”

“Just a friend or...??”, somebody said from behind...followed by... a “woohhoooo...” by some back-benchers.

Neha was smiling...clearly she was enjoying this, showing off her boy-friend in her own class, and in a girls’ college when nobody else could. “He is a software engineer”, the ‘woohooooo’ began again and slowed down..

“.. and he is working in a MNC as a team lead...”, this time the ‘woohooo...’ was much louder and it sustained for quite a long time

“Ok girls, let’s get started with our session”, Desai Ma’m said looking at the girls. “and Tarun, just to inform you, there will be two sections of this session. In first section, you will be shown different diagrams, different figures, different shapes on screen and you have to tell us what you make out of it. What do you see in that picture...okay?”

Obediently, I nodded.

I looked at Neha, while Desai ma’m proceeded to explain the second section. I had an eye-contact with Neha. She smiled and winked again. I was about to do the same, when I saw couple of girls staring at me.

I turned around, and looked at Desai Ma’m.

“The second section is a question and answer round. These girls will ask you questions about day-to-day life and you just have to answer back sincerely. Okay?”

I nodded.

“Alright then, please put in the first slide.”, Desai Ma’m ordered.

And then a series of presentation continued. The white board was filled with different shapes, different pictures. The duration of each slide on the board was not more than 15 seconds. I was having hard time to make something out of it. On few occasions I could answer, but sometimes, I couldn’t.

I was assaulted for 15 mins or so and finally the slideshow was over.

I had a very thirsty throat and thought if I could gulp gallons of water. But one, there was no water around and two, even if there was any, I would not have had any, as it would have meant I was scared and tired of the session. So after a lot of will power, finally I decided not to ask for it.

There was a 10 mins break when the girls were noting down their observations in their journals. I wished, I could peep into everyone’s journal to find out what they had made out from my answers.

I had eye contact with my cuty girl-friend. She held her thumb for a second to show me *I did well*.

Soon, the second session began.

Questions were pretty simple one than I thought. Most of them were related to politics, science, and technology. Some were related to human behavior, some to animals. I was more relaxed now as the session was about to finish in next 10 mins, I had my guts in line by now and I was able to communicate easily with almost all of the girls.

I thought Neha will ask me some question, but she preferred to keep quiet.

When a question was posed, she used to check who has asked the question first and then turn back and look at me to see what I am answering.

Quickly I looked at the watch and realized that all this will be over in 5 mins and I will be out of it for good.

Just then I heard a weird question. "Tarun, can I ask you a question about love life of a boy and a girl?"

Almost all the faces turned back to look at the girl who posed this question.

All the girls moved their body to either side to allow me to see the face of the girl who asked the question.

I saw the cutest girl of the class. I hate to say this but yes, she was prettier than Neha. She was looking at me with her crystal like eyes. Her hair spread across, some on her back and some on her shoulders. She had a fair complexion. Her voice sounded very sweet to me. It was that kind of voice which you hear on a phone-call either from a HR representative of the companies' or from the sales people. I wondered how come I haven't noticed her earlier in this class. Might be she was sitting at the back or because she remained quiet all the while.

"Excuse me?", I said, while my mind was busy wondering from where she landed into this bunch of girls. Was she there before? And if she was, how come I haven't spotted her?... My mind was busy, thinking when I heard her repeating the question.

"Your name miss?", I tried to be very stylish when I asked this.

I remembered our technical consultant *Jack* who was with us couple of months back from USA. Whenever a question is posed to him, he always used to address the person with Miss/Mr as per the gender of the person. That time it appeared very cool to me and eventually I tried mimicking that here.

But as soon as I asked, I realized how out of place it was.

Why should I know her name? I had not asked same question to anybody here. What was it that prompted me to ask her name? Instantly, I looked at Neha to see if she had any problem with me asking her name. But she was too busy and anxious to see what I reply.

"Preeti" that girl replied back.

“It should have been Pretty”, I murmured to myself.

“Yeh, sure...go ahead...”, I kept my left hand behind the bench, legs stretched, back reclined. That’s the usual posture in our professional work-life when somebody asks “Why this issue was there in your code?” and you’ve to answer it to the best of your abilities. You try to be friendly, try to be confident yet bit scared inside.

“Well, Tarun, think of a boy and a girl who are a couple. A typical boyfriend and girlfriend....Who are very happy together, a made for each other kind of pair. But they’ve this weird relationship. Both of them are committed to each other...*for a certain period of time*. They both are sure that they will never be getting married to each other. As long as they are not married to anybody else, they will be together and be loyal to each other, and then they will say good-bye for long. Do you see a big future problem here?”

Preeti waited to breathe.

The moment the question was finished, I looked back at Neha. I caught her, biting her lower lips. She was about to look at me, but then she realized I am staring at her.

She looked elsewhere.

Every girl of the class is now looking at me.

For sure, this question was posed for me and Neha.

This was OUR story.

Neha was Hindu-Maratha, whereas I was a Hindu- Bramhin. Although we were deeply in love with each other, we both were realistic. We were aware that whatever happens, our parents won’t allow the inter-cast marriage. On one hand, we can’t stay away from each other, and on the other hand we don’t want to run away and get married and do some stupid act which will hurt our parents.

So, without any other terms and conditions, we mutually agreed upon being a boyfriend and girlfriend till either or both of us get married to the guy or the girl which our parents choose for us.

I know why the question was and for whom it was.

I had no reason to think, it was our story and I was very clear what to answer. Still for the sake of formality, I waited for about 20 seconds and said,

“You see, Miss Preeti, it all depends upon what kind of situation it is. Sometimes it is not what you see. There could be different angels to the life of that boy and that girl. If you ask me about the future...”

I was answering the question and just then the bell rang.

That ringing sound was enough to stop the session. Desai Ma’m had to go for another lecture. Some girls wanted to go out to the canteen and eat, while some might be wondering if their Romeos are waiting outside the gate. Seemed like nobody was interested in what I had to say. The sounds of closing the books and opening the bags were enough to stop me.

“Well, that’s it for the class”, Desai Ma’m said, “Tarun, thank you for your time” she said while leaving the class. Girls were already flashing out with their books and periodicals.

I looked at Preeti, she was still sitting there and had not moved an inch.

I saw Neha coming towards me.

“Enjoyed?”, Neha asked.

“Of-course, it was fun...” I said.

Neha was already turning towards the door for exit. Somehow I was reluctant to go out. I wanted to talk to Preeti, not sure about what. So I sat on the bench again and started playing with the shoe lace.

The class was empty then, when Preeti got up. She was in no hurry. She picked up her books gracefully. Her eyes down on the desk, her heavy eye-lashes blinking, a sparkling ear-ring was making its way through her thick dark black colored hair.

She was almost close to Neha when I moved.

Apparently, we three went outside together.

“Tarun, this is Preeti, my best friend...”, Neha said

“Best friend?”, I was surprised, “Then how come you haven’t introduced me in the beginning.”

“Well you see...she was sitting at the far back and it was not convenient, so thought of introducing her after the class...”, Neha explained.

“I see...”, I said while eyeing Preeti from the corner of my eye.

“Well...see you then...nice meeting you...”, Preeti said looking at me.

I desperately wanted to talk to her more, know her more. But how can I stop her?

“You don’t want the answer for your question?”, I enquired.

“I know the answer. Already have discussed it with Neha, but not convinced so far...”, Preeti said forcing a smile on face and looking at Neha.

“Well, then let ME try...” *‘was I forcing myself too much?’* Suddenly Preeti said, “Sure...try your best, but not now. I have to run to City Library. May be tomorrow, after our 11.30 lecture?”

I nodded.

Preeti said bye to Neha. They both hugged each other and then Preeti went.

All of a sudden I realized the presence of Neha. She had been just bouncing her head from me to Preeti and vice versa while we were talking. I felt bad for her. I should have asked if it is okay with her to all of us meet tomorrow. She might have felt the importance in front of her best friend.

“So what’s your plan now?”, I asked Neha.. “Do you have any more classes left?”

Neha quickly went through the time-table and said, "Not really, there is one after one and half hrs gap. Don't think anybody will wait for that class and apparently it will be cancelled only.

What about you?"

"Well, I am planning to go for a romantic and erotic movie with my girlfriend followed by lunch, provided my girlfriend is okay with it."

Neha hit me with a thick-book that she was holding.

4

My sleep was disturbed by a crazy beeping sound of washing machine. With trouble, I opened eyes and looked at the watch.

It showed 9.30 am.

"Why do I have to wake up so late...?", I cursed myself.

Mom told me, my best friend called me two times. Strangely his name was a girl's name earlier=*Neha* which was later corrected as *Nehar*.

I was so busy dreaming about yesterday's encounter, that I almost had forgotten I have to meet Preeti today.

I jumped off the bed and went straight for a quick bath.

I was late, when I reached college. Weirdly I was looking out for Preeti, whereas I should have been searching Neha.

And then I saw Preeti standing in a pool of sun-rays that, made their way from the dense leaves of a tree just to highlight her beauty.

She was wearing a white color frock with the design of lilies and sunflowers printed on it. Her frock was trying its best to cover knees, but in vein !! She was looking down with a bunch of books in hand tightly held to her chest and a small sack clung on the back.

I always wonder, why all girls have to hold the books in hand? I have seen Neha doing the same, and I have seen most of the girls doing it as well.

Why do they have to carry that little sack then? If they could get a big size sack, all books can easily fit in it. Or is it just another style statement that these girls follow?

I pulled aside Preeti. She looked at me and smiled.

I mirrored that.

"Hi, How are you?", I said, *Shouldn't I be asking where Neha is instead?*

She said, she is fine. Then she told me that Neha was at the PCO booth trying to call my home number.

I could see the PCO guy talking on the phone, while Neha was standing by the side trying to explain him something without making any sound. I was sure, that guy was talking to my mom asking whether I left?

Neha came back, furiously. "What is this? It's already 12.15. You should have been here by 11.30 isn't it?"

I was in no mood listening to her *bak-bak*. I smiled and holding my ears said "Sorry!!".

She smiled back.

"Let's go to the ice-cream shop. A double scoop will cool you down." I said.

Neha jumped with joy.

"Shall we?", I looked enquiringly at Preeti.

"Sure", she said and started walking very gracefully.

I won't be able to explain what that grace means, but it was feast to the eyes to watch her walking. Head held high, straight walk, long legs. Confidence and attitude both filled in style.....

Ice-cream parlor was just across the street.

Me and Neha both ordered usual choco-chips while Preeti ordered strawberry.

We ate quietly.

When we finished, I asked both the girls "Repeat?"

Preeti denied the offer saying she was done with it while Neha ordered one more. Needless to say, I wasn't interested repeating the ice-cream either.

While Neha was busy eating her next scoop, and finding the Cadbury pieces in it, I looked at Preeti and said, "So coming back to your question, here are my thoughts..."

For the next 15 minutes I kept talking. Preeti was listening, while Neha finished her second scoop. I wanted my complete concentration on what I was talking to Preeti, so I insisted Neha to have one more scoop. I told her that last week only I had tried the new arrival of Sitafal flavor and it was delicious. Eventually she had it, while I continued to talk.

When I finished, I looked enquiringly at her.

Preeti thought for a while and said, "So whatever you just said is well justified, but not convincing. In short, you are supporting a live-in relationship, isn't it?"

I said, "No Preeti...", I guess first time I called her by her name, and it felt good to me.

"Live-in is a different thing. When you are in live-in relationship, it is almost a public affair. Your family knows about it, your neighborhood knows. It is as good as a married life. Two souls staying under a same roof, needless to say involved in sexual relationship as well. Nobody expect they will be having their sleeping beds in two different rooms. Whereas with the kind of relationship we are talking does not have a sexual relation in it."

"NO???", she raised her eyebrows and looked at me and Neha inquisitively .

“NO!, I mean as long as you do not count Fondling as a sexual relationship.”, I smiled and said.

Neha giggled.

“The advantage of this is, nobody is forcing anything on his or her partner. They are anyways not going to get married in future, so nobody tries and expects the other person to change. And when there are no OTHER terms and conditions, what remains is just Love. And I believe in such relations, love blossoms.”

We were not officially talking about Me or Neha. It was just a question Preeti raised and I explained. I wanted to tell her more, based on our experiences, but was not sure what all things Neha had told her.

“GOD...I’ve to leave now...”, Preeti looked at her watch and said..

“Yeh, or else the city library will close”, I said smiling.

Preeti chuckled and left.

It was almost 1.30.

Neha said, “Phew, I am heavy with the ice-cream. What is your plan now?”

I had no intentions what-so-ever of wandering all over the places for no reason. Besides, I wanted to be idle for some time in some shabby corner of my home and just think about this visit. I wanted to re-feel the magic of Preeti. I wanted to feel the aching of my heart when I had the eye contact with her. I wanted to have those goose-bumps that I had when she corrected her hair which were falling on her shoulder and face again and again. I wanted to listen to the tinkling of her bangles and sparkling of her ear rings.

“Nothing, I have to take backup before I format my PC. It is hell of a job”, I said.

“Hmm, even I have some assignments to cover for tomorrow’s practical”, Neha said, “Let’s go home then. You drop me at my place and do whatever you want to”, she said smiling.

While on our way back, I asked Neha, “So what’s her name?”

“Preeti Singh...”, she said, “She is a new joinee in our class, but in no time we are best buddies. Preeti is a very nice girl, and friendly too. I just love her.”

“Me too...”, it just slipped. I was glad that the words were missed by Neha in the roaring sound of public transport bus which just passed by.

5

I was back to work. Mondays are the biggest enemies, especially of the software professionals. For me, it was hell being at desk after 7 days leave. My mailbox was flooded with mails. I was not so sure from where to begin.

People who have spent a good weekend, enjoying with their family and friends, their boyfriends and girlfriends, should rather look happy after a break. But it was not the case. They all were back to reality after the dreamy weekend.

I was amongst them.

What a week I had!! The encounter with Preeti was enough for me to be happy and feel pleasant for many more weeks to come. I haven't seen her after our last visit. But all those memories were still fresh inside and I was able to recollect every bit of it.

Outlook meeting reminder popped-up to alert me about some crappy status meeting which was due in next 15 minutes.

I looked at my watch. It was half past 11. I wondered what *Preeti* would be doing. She might have finished with her classes and as usual will be heading for the city library in about thirty minutes.

I sighed and started clearing my mailbox, then an idea struck my mind. I quickly opened my Yahoo messenger and buzzed my colleague, Nitin.

"Hey Dude!"

"Hey Tarun...hiee...nice to c u back at work. How was your vacation?"

"It was all good. Hey listen, I have to run down to City Library to renew my subscription. Today is the last day and I will have to pay fine if I skip it. I just forgot to take care of it during vacation. I will be back in an hour or so. Can you please update it in the status meeting?"

"Yes sure...np, anyways got a mail from Kumar that he will be delayed. So don't think there will be any meeting. But if there is, I will update."

"Thanks dude, I don't have anything to update as such, because I was on leave for a complete week, but if anybody, asks, just let them know I will be back soon."

"sure man, I will...go slow, drive safely, don't hurry up...", messages from Nitin were flashing on my screen, but I was already gone by then.

If you ask me what is good thing about IT industry, it forces you to be presentable most of the time. We robots are always dressed in the best of our formals, hair nicely combed, shoes polished, mild deo / perfume fragrance, branded stuff makes you feel good and confident.

I quickly glanced at the mirror to make sure everything is in order and left for the city library.

I was hoping and praying for two things. One, Preeti would be there, and two, Neha shouldn't be with her.

City library was flooded with college youths, retired people, house-wives and the usual crowd. I made my way inside, among the crowd, while my eyes were continuously searching for Preeti.

"Where could she be?", was thinking to myself reading the sub-sections of the library.

Cooking, Story books, Technical stuff, Sci-fi, Bollywood and Hollywood gossip magazines. Can't tell where she will be, if at all she is here..... Somewhere in my heart, I was sure enough to realize that she is here.

I spent next 20 minutes searching for her but was disappointed.

It was the last section left...the recipe section. I went inside. Other than couple of newly married girls, it was empty.

I was about to turn back when I heard that sweet voice, "May I help you Tarun?"

I turned back to see the cute face in front of me. Dressed in a pearl white salwar-kamiz, a white bindi and silver colored bangles she was looking no less than an angel.

"Hey...hi...", I said as if she was the last person I was expecting to be here.

"hiee", she smiled and said.

"I have a presentation due at 3 today and needed some information from popular technical periodicals..."

"I see...", she said

"Will just glance through and will be back in office...", I continued to fake.

"Tarun...Don't you think, you are searching in the wrong section?", while saying so she pointed me to a board which read "Recipe"

I was caught in my teeth. I just hopelessly smiled.

"What about you? How come you are here today? Change of books?" I asked her.

"No, I work here, part-time", she replied.

"You what?", I was not sure if I heard it correctly.

"I work here...part time", she said.

"Work? For what?" I was shocked.

"I love reading. I get to glance through so many knowledge base here, I feel good surrounded by books, get to meet new people and also manage to earn some cash to spend", she said.

"And what about your late evening classes?", I asked her.

"I work in either of the two shifts. 12-4 or 3-7", she replied back.

“That’s wonderful”, inside I was unknowingly comparing her with Neha. She will make her faces if somebody asks her to read a book or to work. She hates both the things and was determined to marry someone who will never ask her to work.

On the other hand, this lady looked self-made - with lots of self-esteem, and not ashamed of working. She could have very easily lied to me, but she stuck to the truth.

When I was about to say something, an old lady came near Preeti.

“Miss, can I get a book on Meditation?”

“Sure Ma’m, this way please”, Preeti pointed that lady to another section. Before going with her, she turned back and said, “Alright Tarun, I will get back to my work. If you need anything, let me know. I will be at desk 3 on 2nd floor”

“I want a date with you.. Can I??, I murmured under my breathe.

Without giving me a chance to say anything, or for that matter at-least say good bye, she was gone.

I was thinking whether I should tell Neha about my visit to City Library and an encounter with Preeti? Or should I just keep quiet and see if Preeti tell Neha about it.

I opted for the second choice.

For the next 3-4 days, I was constantly in touch with Neha, but she never mentioned about it. After 4 days, I was sure that, like me, Preeti also decided to stay dumb.

The immediate thing I did next was to subscribe for the annual membership in City Library. I also told Preeti to subscribe me for the email alerts of new arrivals of technical publications.

She asked me whether I read *Sydney Sheldon*, and my answer was a big NO.

I kind of had a hangover of Preeti Day and night I was thinking about her ONLY. I had to take extra caution while talking to Neha. I was scared that some-day inadvertently I will call out Neha as Preeti!!!!

I started visiting the city library regularly. Considering my office timings, I could only go there in the evening i.e. 3 to 7 pm shift. So, I was not able to see or meet Preeti always, but still I kept going there frequently. Soon I got the pattern right and my visits to the library were in sync with her second shift.

Sometimes, I could talk to her for a while, but most of the times it was just a casual ‘Hi’ and ‘Bye’. Never-the-less, we atleast had eye-contacts regularly.

One day, I was standing at the kiosk, pretending to be searching some book in the terminal, but was busy looking at her. She was standing just next to me, occupied with her work of updating the new arrivals, consultation to the usual members, telephone calls and the usual tasks. I was completely in my thoughts when suddenly she looked up at me. I quickly tried my best to look elsewhere, but I was sure that I was caught staring at her. After that it became regular for both of us, staring at each other. I was not sure if she was looking at me just to find out that if I am looking at her.

There is no explanation why those gazing were for. Because we never smiled, we never exchanged any emotions across when we had eye-contacts. We just kept looking at each other for a second and then look elsewhere.

Whatever it was, it was enough for me to be happy.

This kept going for almost a month. There were two Tarun's personalities that existed. One for Neha and one for the secret eye contacts in city library with Preeti.

Meanwhile, I checked their observations about the psychology test that was conducted on me. Neha's report was all positive (and I guess biased) while Preeti refused to share her Journal with me. I kept wondering what she found out and what she is thinking about me.

I was in complete dilemma as to what to do next. I cannot cheat on Neha. Whatever our relationship type was, we still were boyfriend and girlfriend, for more than 2 years. On the other hand, I was not at all able to figure out what is going on in Preeti's mind. My mind was accusing me for the fact that even though not officially, I was still cheating Neha. I was also worried about what will happen if Neha finds out about my regular visits to City Library? What if she already is noticing the change in me?

I had to do something, and that something has to be done fast.

6

Destiny answered.

I was in office when I got a call from Neha.

“Tarun, I want to meet you. See you today evening at 7.30 in Swirls”

“Hello!!, hold on, I have some things to finish today, before I call it a day. I might will be late. How about tomorrow evening?”, I tried to postpone the meeting.

“NO...”, Neha almost shouted in my ears, “It has to be today...I don’t know how you will manage, but I am waiting at 7.30. Don’t keep us waiting for long...”

“US? Who else is with you?”, curious to know, I asked.

“Preeti...”, Neha said and she hung up.

My mind was busy with so many possibilities of questions.

Did Preeti talked?

Did Neha noticed anything?

Did she find out I am seeing Preeti in Library?

I had no answer to any of these, nor I was sure enough about what to tell Neha if any of these questions were true.

I dragged myself till 6.45. My work was obviously not finished, but I promised my Project Manager that I will work from home late night and will finish the pending tasks today only.

I reached Swirls on time. Neha and Preeti were ahead of time. I saw them waiting for me.

Preeti, as always was looking gorgeous. She was wearing a Pink Kameez which was a perfect fit to her body and a white salwar. Her hair were tied up with a strawberry colored duppatta.

“Isn’t this style old fashioned?”, I paused to think for a second... “I mean this style is a bit retro. I have seen Mumtaz or Neetu Singh doing this kind of style in 80’s, i.e. tying the hair using duppatta.” But who cares, that still was looking beautiful on Preeti.

I tried to read their faces. Are they worried? tensed? angry? But in vain... that again left me clueless.

I sighed and went straight to them.

“What’z up Neha?”, I pulled up chair and tried to sit close to Neha and yet could see Preeti.

“Problem hain!!!!”, Neha said in as sadistic way as possible.

“Why? What happened?”, I was still guessing.

“Kal ladkewale aa rahe hain muze dekhne”, she said.

I felt as if I was thrown in a heap of rose-petals.

“What? What are you saying?”, I tried to hide my laugh and joy.

“Haan, Some Patil from outskirts.”

“But...you are just 23 now, how can you marry so soon?” I asked.

“What jaar!, you okay with my marriage?” Neha furiously asked.

“Okay okay...peace. Who is this guy?”, I diplomatically avoided her question.

“He is someone from one of my relatives. They are very rich. They own two petrol pumps, a big nursery of rose garden and some acres of grapes plantation.”, she said

“WOW...thatz *HUGE!*”, I said, “So what is the matter?”

“Well, I don’t want to marry so soon. Me getting married means, I won’t be able to see you or meet you.”, she was still speaking in her sad voice.

“Why Not? Is *your* husband such a narrow-minded?”, I emphasized on the word ‘your’. For me, she is already somebody else’s now.

“No not that. I mean he won’t have a problem with me seeing my friends, but he certainly will have if I keep seeing my boyfriend.”, Neha tried to explain the situation.

“Is he from your cast?”, I asked Neha.

“Then what!”, Neha replied.

“Have you seen the photo of that guy? Is he okay kind?”

“Yes, I mean in photo at-least he looks cool.”

Bingo...I thought, now final question.

“Tell them, you want to continue with your learning and would like to complete your graduation first before you get married” I was tempted to cross my fingers, but I avoided it.

“I Did. But they are okay with me continuing with my education. They even are encouraging me to continue with MA as well.”, Neha said.

“*Well that’s it then.*”, I thought to myself, “*There is no reason why Neha should say NO, and her family should listen to her.*”

While I was thinking, I noticed that Preeti is looking at me, searching my face, trying to read what is going on.

We all then talked and talked, without much of a fruitful decision.

I got a feeling that Neha was disappointed. She was expecting something positive from me. Something that will push her marriage ahead for a justifying reason, so that we could keep seeing each other for a bit longer time.

I saw her eyes moistening.

I was dry, might be because I was psychologically out of this relationship, the moment I sited Preeti.

I pitied Neha, but that's what we had asked for. It was bound to happen someday. We only had kept ignoring that fact.

I eyed Preeti.

"Save yourself from me babe, I am a free bird now" I thought so loudly that I wondered whether she have heard it.

I had thought that it would be easy for me to get out of this relationship. But it was not.

When Neha told me that her wedding is confirmed, I felt the pain in my heart. This was the girl with whom I was attached for almost two years now and she won't be mine after couple of months. I recollected all the fun moments, sensational and intimate moments, the sharing, the bonding..... soon it will all be over.

No matter how hard you try, it won't be the same Tarun and the same Neha after a while.

I thought to call up Neha, but then gave-up. There is no point in making it difficult for both of us. She was trying hard to come out of it, and the same implied to me.

I thought to visit City library instead.

"Anything new?", I asked Preeti on counter, while keeping my books in the *in* tray.

"Yes, there is this Windows 2003 unleashed edition arrived this morning. I haven't entered it yet in the system, so others don't know about it. I kept it for you.", she said.

"Oh, thank you so much, I was desperately looking for that", I said, while Preeti continued to enter the details of the book in the system and then set the flag as *allotted* in my name.

I was in grief. The thought of departing from Neha was still hurting me. You can see it on my pale face and you will know something is wrong.

"You okay?", Preeti asked.

"Yes...sort off...", I replied.

"I will be done in 15 minutes here, care for a coffee?", Preeti asked.

Now that is something I should cheer for. In all these days, we never had a coffee together. I never dared to ask and Preeti never bothered to ask either.

I couldn't say no.

With coffee, I was in mixed emotions, confused whether I should be happy now or should be sad.

Do I still love Neha? Should I move ahead and try to stop her from getting married to someone else? Should I try to convince our parents and finally get married to Neha? Or is it just an emotional feeling because of departing away from your girlfriend.

Preeti talked, while I preferred to listen.

Preeti avoided talking about Neha or any reference about her.

She, in general discussed about her Library work versus my software work. First time, she talked about her family and asked me about mine as well.

All in all, it was a usual friendly talk.

We finished in 10-15 minutes and headed back to our respective places.

I felt relaxed when I came back home. For a while, Neha's topic was out of my mind.

I tried to think about Preeti, but couldn't do so. My mind kept transferring the control to Neha and our past 2 years.

Grief and pain kept increasing. Finally I turned off the night lamp, pulled the blanket up on my face, closed eyes and kept waiting for sleep to hug me.

Not sure at what time, I fell asleep.

'23rd June', that's what the invitation card had said. THE day when Neha will be married.

Obviously I was in no mood of attending her wedding. I was scared that I would do something foolish or at worst will break off in tears. So I told Neha that I was going out of town for some conferences and that I would see the newly married couple only after I am back.

I could read her mind. She wanted me to be there to see her getting married. She wanted to be happy for the last time, seeing me there. But I am sure; she also had the scary feeling that I had. Although she shouted and cursed me for not able to attend her wedding, somewhere inside she felt relaxed.

Wedding location was neatly decorated. Surrounding was buzzing with lots of festive-dressed peoples, noisy kids, event-management teams.

I was right there, sitting in a Seven-7 bar, which was exactly opposite to the venue, sipping a chilled beer in one corner.

I saw two decorated cars coming in. I saw uncle-aunty coming out of the car while the driver held the other door open. I was sure, he did it for the bride to come out. For a moment, I thought to get up and take a quick look at Neha, but then avoided doing so.

After 20-30 mins, few more cars came in, luxurious cars – Pajero, Lancer, Civic. The moment those cars stopped, the band started blowing the usual songs of '*Raja ki aayegi baraat*' in full blow.

This has to be the groom. I thought.

I looked at the wrist watch. It was quarter past six. 45 more minutes, and I was expecting the "Tadeo Lagnam..."

I was feeling very bad, sad, and emotional. I was wondering, since when I became so senti?. I blamed the alcohol. It surely had to be impure, that I was feeling senti.

Time was ticking.

Cell phone rang and I came out of my trance. I allowed the cell-phone to ring a couple of more time. I gulped a big sip of the beer, cleared my throat and picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi Tarun, Preeti here."

"Preeti? Hiee, whatz up?"

"Where are you Tarun?"

“Me? I am in Bangalore yaar, stuck up with this crazy conference.” I spoke in a voice as normal as I can.

“Don’t lie to me Tarun, seriously tell me where are you.”, Preeti said.

“Why would I lie? Seriously I am in Bangalore”, I stuck to what I said earlier to Neha and few minutes back to Preeti.

“Oh really, then it has to be a coincidence that your conference and your office are playing a song on a band, that eventually is being played here as well.”

“*Shit!!*”, I murmured

“Ok, so I am here only, what is it?”

“Can’t you come down here? Neha wants to meet you. She asked me 10 times enquiring if you are really in Bangalore. She will be happy to see you before she...”

“No...she won’t be happy when she will see me...”, I interrupted...“I don’t want to mess up her marriage Preeti. Things might go beyond control. It’s better to stay where I am, out of her sight.”

“Tell me Tarun, where you are exactly. Don’t worry, I won’t tell Neha.”, she said.

“I am in Seven-7 bar, just opposite to the garden.”

“Okay”, she said and hung up the call.

Within few minutes, I saw Preeti rushing inside the bar.

She was wearing that typical Punjabi maroon colored chania-choli with a golden colored design embossed on it. With a light make-up, and her untied hair falling on her shoulder, she looked amazing.

She came straight to my table.

Seeing such a pretty lady in a beer-bar, right from the wedding venue, startled the half-awake people around. They might have thought Preeti was a bride trying to escape or run away with her boyfriend waiting, half-drunk in a bar.

She pulled her chair close to me and sat down.

She was looking straight into my eyes.

I couldn’t, and so I looked down.

“What is this Tarun? She still have hopes that from no-where you will be come to greet her.”, She whispered.

She was about to say something else, but stopped when she looked at me.

I could see her blur, as tear drops gathered in my eyes.

"I can't Preeti, I can't. I can't face her. Please try to understand."

She kept her hand on mine and patted.

First drop of tear just escaped from its boundaries and rolled down on my cheek.

Preeti moved forward and hugged me.

I couldn't control more and kept weeping for a minute or so.

I realized that people around were staring at us weirdly; I cleaned my eyes and moved aside.

Preeti held her right hand open in front of me.

"Akshata hain..", she said.. pointing to the colored rice grains. "Neha definitely deserve your blessings Tarun."

She poured some in my hand and ran away.

I heard the last vedic chant followed by the "Tadev Lagnam..." It continued for a while and then I heard clapping of hands followed by the band playing in best of their performance.

I looked around; everybody was busy with their drinks.

I picked up some of the rice-grains and threw them in the air, outside.

All the Best Neha.. wish you all the Best. Forget me and forgive me, for pulling you into this. We should not have started this in the first place.

God bless you!!

I sat down, finished the remaining drink top-to bottom.

Slowly, I covered my face with my hands with my head resting on the table.

That cold, chilled beer was dripping from my eyes in the form of warm tear drops.

Life moves on.

It took some time for me to stabilize. But I somehow managed. Work was pouring down in office and I was totally into it. We had this critical release planned, and I was not only slogging 13 hrs a day, but had to sacrifice my weekends as well.

I just managed to go once to City Library, and it was for genuine reason. I needed some periodicals so it was a quick visit.

Preeti told me, Neha had gone to Mauritius for her honeymoon, and that she will be back only after a month.

Days passed by and soon memories of Neha were faded.

After a month and half, I got a call from the PCO booth near Neha's college. I looked at the number and thought, "Could it be Preeti calling from that booth?"

I was bit disappointed to hear Neha on the other side.

"Hi Tarun!!", Neha was bouncing in her voice

"Hey Neha.. How are you??", was about to say *darling* as usual, but avoided.

"I'm just fine. I am back to college. Care for coffee?", she asked

I had no intentions of seeing her, but anyways I was not there for her wedding and I thought at least I should see her and talk about her wedding. And who knows, Preeti might as well be there.

Thought of Preeti encouraged me to say Yes.

Next build was scheduled late evening, and I had a time to kill. So I took my keys and headed straight towards the college.

I was disappointed again, not seeing Preeti with Neha.

Neha looked beautiful with her *sindoor*, crystal-maroon bangles, and fresh colored dress. I noticed that she had put on some weight too.

There was no hug this time when we met; it was just a quick handshake.

"So?? How was it?", I asked

"How was it what? The wedding or the Honeymoon?", Neha asked mischievously.

"Well!!, both?"

“Both were good. Mauritius was hot but was equally good, especially the virgin beaches with crystal blue colored water were amazing.”, she kept talking about customs of Mauritius, culture, scenic beauty.

Frankly, I was bored.

Finally, when she was done, she looked into my eyes and said, “I missed you Tarun. This all could have been more beautiful and more fun filled, if you were there.”

It was a very touchy statement. On any other given day, I could have hugged her. But the girl seating next to me was no more my girl-friend. She was wife of someone now.

“Well, I don’t have a problem accompanying you, unless your husband mind it”.

She smiled. Then picked a cell-phone from her purse and called,

“Bhaiyyaa, chalo, I am waiting”

Soon a black colored Scorpio stopped outside the café gate.

Neha got up from her seat, “Time to go”, she said. Quickly she picked up some 20rs. Notes and placed it on table. I could see her purse, filled with a bunch of 100rs notes.

For a minute we looked into eyes of each other and then she went.

I stood there looking, if by chance I could see Preeti around and then went back to work.

My life was miserable. I was all alone, no girl-friend, lot of work to be taken care of within a short deadline, thoughts of Preeti constantly hitting my mind and no clue as to what to do about her.

Meanwhile, Preeti got her first cell phone. Surprisingly she sms’ed me her number with a warning note of not to call her, unless it is very much important. The reason being, in those days, incoming calls were also heavily charged, almost 6-7 rs/min.

I asked, what if I wanted to talk to her about something which is not so important?, and she replied I can give her a miss call from my cell, and she’ll call back.

Over a period of time, we developed some pattern. One ring was meant for just a *Hi*, two rings were for *I just thought about you*, three rings were meant for, *need to talk to you, although not that much urgent*.

This helped me tremendously. Although we rarely talked, with a cell phone aside, Preeti was just a miss call away from me. Initially from both of us it was a one ring call. But one day, I replied with two rings, and two days later Preeti gave me a two ring call.

“Does that mean anything?”, I casually thought.

One day, while I was sipping coffee in our pantry room, I got a call from Preeti. She was breathing heavily.

“What happened? You okay?”, I was worried

“Yes, sort of”, she replied

“Why? What happened?” I was eagerly wanted to know what could have disturbed Preeti

“Nothing, just had a fight with Neha”, Preeti said

“Neha? About what?”

“About YOU!”, she said after waiting for a second

“Look, I am confused; can you tell me what happened exactly?”

There was silence on the phone for some time. I felt she is covering the mouthpiece to clear her throat, or at worst control her voice, and then she said

“I was showing my cell phone to her, and she saw those tones of miss-calls and couple of sms’ of yours in my cell.

She asked me, since when *this* is going on?

I said *THIS* means what?

She said, since when we are calling and sms’ing each other.

I told her, it’s been a while.

She was furious, that I haven’t told her.

Tell me Tarun, why should I? After all, Tarun is not a property of Neha.

Neha is nobody to you. Right Tarun?”

After a brief moment, I said, “Correct. Neha is my past”. I wished if I could say .. *and you are my future*.

“Then let’s clear it up-front. Let’s meet on Saturday, you me and Neha. Alright?”

I said *alright*.

Saturday morning, we meet at the usual *café*. We had decided to meet at 11.30, although I asked Preeti to be there by 10.30 or so, so that we could discuss what we were going to talk.

Preeti was looking exceptionally well today. She was wearing a off-white color Capri with pale white color squares on it and a florescent green color shirt. She also had a multi-color stroll wrapped around her neck.

I saw her first time in casual wear.

I thought, "*What if I have a girl-friend like this? Half of my colleagues and friends will die just because of jealousy*"

Before I could say anything, she ordered two caffeine for us.

"See Tarun, whatever relationship you and Neha had was clearly a past. You already said, she is nobody to you now, and I am sure, it should be the same case with her.

Now I don't expect Neha to anticipate me telling every time I meet you, or we call each other. Who is she to still claim her rights on you?"

The coffee boy stopped half-way. He thought Preeti and I are having fights.

I smiled and asked him to bring the coffees.

"Ok.. cool down, let's see what she has to say and then I will take care of it", I said

"See Tarun, she is creating a big problem for me now.", Preeti said

"What problem?", I asked

"She already have planted a seed about you. We *were* good friends, but whatever she said that day, I am worried..."

I clearly noticed the We *were* good friends and that pleased me a lot.

I was about to say something, but then Neha came in.

She paused at the gate, looked at *US*, hatred in her eyes.

"Hey Tarun, hie Preeti", she said

We both said *Hi* in reply, trying to sound as casual and friendly as possible.

She looked at our half empty coffee cups. "You have been here for long time?"

Nobody said anything.

"Have you ordered anything for me Preeti?"

Preeti shook her head.

“Of course!, why would you?”, she moved her hands in air and called the coffee-boy to order something.

Preeti looked at me for that *sarcastic* statement. I looked back at her.

“So how is your life Tarun?”, that sarcastic tone continued

I said, it is fine.

“Better than before?”, Neha asked again.

I nodded.

“How is Preeti?”, Neha asked me

“You asking me?”, I said

“Yes”, Neha said in reply

“Ask her, why me?”, I said

“I thought you might be knowing it”, Neha

“Look Neha, there is some misunderstanding.”, I said

“Really? Care to explain me?”, Neha asked

I was about to say something, but Preeti put her hand on mine. That touch, that feeling, that warmth was heaven. I felt so good.

“Why would he explain anything to you?”, Preeti asked Neha

“Are you his attorney?”, Neha asked Preeti

“No, I am his friend. And your questions are taunting US”, Preeti said

“Well, Preeti, you might be forgetting, Me and Tarun were together for 2 years. We were boy-friend and girl-friend. I hope you remember.”, Neha said

“Exactly Neha that is what my point is. You *were*. You are married now, and whatever relationship you and Tarun had, is over. It is a history now.”

Neha was thinking what to say, but she couldn't think of any.

“And now that Tarun is out of the relationship, I don't think so you should be bothered with whom he talk, with whom he is friendly and other stuff.”

“We loved each other for two years..”, Neha was trying to make her point, when Preeti interrupted her.

“NO. I think you both had a big misunderstanding”

Neha was shocked, so was I.

“What do you mean NO? We did loved each other, right Tarun?”, Neha asked.

“No Neha, it was not love. I am sure of it. If you guys had really loved each other, you could have got married then.”

“Oh come-on, at least thousand times I told you what the problem was. Neither my parents, nor his parents could have allowed us to get married. Both of them were against the inter-cast marriage.” Neha laughed while saying this.

“Yes Neha you told me alright. But love cannot be suppressed by any human or supernatural power on earth. Love never dies, its immortal. You could have found thousand ways than to sadly separate apart.

When a woman wants to have something, she gets it by any means.

I don't think so you loved each other”, Preeti was pouring her heart out.

I was stumped, and instantly thought what Preeti said moments before is the truth. I tried to put Preeti in the place of Neha and imagined what if my parents opposed the marriage. Definitely I could have done something than just seat back with a pint of beer watching her getting married.

“You are right Preeti, and thanks for pointing that out.” I thought to myself.

“You don't mean anything to Tarun now and I guess it should be the same for you, am I right Tarun?”, Preeti finished with a deep breathe.

I was actually enjoying this scene. Two beautiful girls were fighting for me. Frankly I was not bothered about Neha, but the thought of Preeti covering me and supporting our friendship was pleasing me a lot.

I nodded when Preeti asked me that question.

“What? Tarun? Am I nobody to you now?”, Neha was shocked

“Not literally Nobody, but we are just friends now. You can expect your friend to share their life, but you can't impose it if he/ she don't want to” I tried to put it in a descent way.

Arguments kept going for a while, but Neha had no valid point to fight for and after a while, she was dumb struck.

Finally, she called her driver, then took out money from her purse and put it on table.

“I am paying for my share, you take of yours.”

Then she looked at me and said, “Good that we are at least friends. So as a friend's advice, don't do the same mistake that we did Tarun. You still won't be able to marry Preeti. Do you want to repeat the History? Do you want to suffer again in your relationship?”, she said this and left.

I had no answer. She said only one correct thing and it was 100% correct.

With Neha gone, the tension in the air was released. We both felt relaxed.

“Phew”, I said while checking my forehead for any sweat drops, “that was a heroic thing, you just did”

The remains of the coffee were ice-cold.

“Would you care for another coffee?”, I asked Preeti and she said “Yes”

While we were enjoying our fresh cup of coffee, I recollected that I was supposed to ask Preeti something.

“So what were you talking about planting some seeds by Neha. What was that?”

“Nothing”, she said

“What nothing? Tell me what Neha said”, I was still pushing

“Nothing Tarun, leave it okay?. Look, my final exams are scheduled next week and I don’t want to flunk in that. Got to go now”, Preeti got out of her chair, as she said this.

I thought in a flash of moment, trusted my instincts and without hesitation caught Preeti’s arm. Her soft, milky white palm was crumpled in my hand. That touch awaked thousands of my senses instantly. I felt my ears getting hot.

I looked at Preeti. By no means, she was trying to rescue. I could feel, she was breathing heavily again, her eyes partially closed for the divine ecstasy. I could see her blushing.

“Sir!.. bill”, waiter put the coffee bill on our table

He had to come just now, I was furious.

“Bye Tarun, see you after my exams”, Preeti said and she left the coffee shop

I quickly pulled my cell and typed a sms to Preeti, which said “*Hum Aapake Hain Kaun?*”

I was looking at the back of Preeti, when she was standing on the divider to cross the remaining half of the road. She paused, pulled her mobile out and read something.

I was shaking.

She stood there; her back is still facing me.

The next half road was empty as a signal turned red.

She turned back, did that act and ran away without looking back again.

I was just blessed with a flying kiss by this utterly beautiful angel of my life.

The thing that I felt, can easily be used as a reference, or a content write up by Wikipedia to explain the feeling of *Falling in love for the first time*.

Two days before the exam, Preeti sms'ed me that Neha had withdrawn her name from the college. She is no more interested in continuing with her studies furthermore.

I read the message two times and deleted it from my cell as if this is the last thing that was related to Neha. There won't be any reference to Neha henceforth in my life.

I was counting days for the exam to get over. Preeti's exam schedule was by-heart to me. I never called her, sms'd her or tried to contact her, not even for saying 'All the Best' when the exam started.

My best wishes were always with her, and I was sure Preeti knew it very well. I had no intentions of distracting her from studies.

I was slogging myself day and night to deliver the last patches. I wanted to finish everything before Preeti is done with her exam, so that I can take a leave again to spend time with her.

Being a team-lead, I forced my team to work equally hard. I pitied them, but my love is on top priority than this bunch of junior people.

One day before the exam, I was still in the office when the clock struck to 1am. I was too tired. Work was almost finished but these junior people always mess with something and the formality was dragged by couple of more hours.

I was wondering what Preeti might be doing at this time. I remembered her saying, last day subject was the easiest of all. Besides it is just a 50 marks paper. I thought she might be asleep by now. But the urge to talk to her and listen to the sweet voice was too much for me. I couldn't control it and decided to call her. *Only two rings, if she picks it up, otherwise I will place the receiver back.*

I dialed her number, it ringed first time, and I heard her sweet voice "Hiee!"

"Did I disturb you?", I whispered trying to control my voice so that colleagues in nearby cubicles won't hear me.

"Telepathy, you see", she said, "I was thinking of calling you, just then you called", she said with a joy in her voice

"Thought to talk to you, my release is almost on the way. Feeling too tired." I said

"Don't push too hard Tarun, take care of your health. I.. I need you for rest of my life", she whispered

My heart was beating fast and loud

“Dying to see you tomorrow”, I said, “There are lot many things to talk about, you see”, I said mischievously.

“Me too”, she said, “Good night Tarun”

“Good night Preeti”, I said

I was reluctant to keep the receiver down. I wanted her to disconnect the call first, so I stayed on line.

Preeti was also still on line. I could hear her heavy breathing, and then I heard a big “Mwaaaah”

The line was dead before I could say anything.

Sometime, early morning around 3.30 or so, we sent out our release mail. All the efforts that we had put on in last one month or so, have finally paid off. It was a big relief for all of us.

One and half hour later, I was back home, lying in the bed in trance. Not sure if I was awake, not sure if I was asleep.

I woke up startled by around 10.45. *Preeti will be starting with her last paper in 15 minutes and should be over by 1pm.*

This was not the first time that I had Preeti’s thought in mind even before I got out of the bed.

I looked in the mirror. That release certainly had an effect on me. Un-shaven face, hair grown, pale eyes because of sleep-less nights..... I looked like a disaster.

I just had 2 hrs before I could meet my dream angel.

By 12, I was almost ready when I got a call from Preeti. I looked into the watch, not believing if Preeti is really calling or my clock is showing wrong time.

I hastily picked up the phone. Before I could say anything Preeti said, “You better be there at my college gate by 12.30. I can’t wait to see you till 1. I have written enough paper that will score me to grade Pass. F*** with the percentage, I can’t write more.”

“Where are you Preeti? Does your examiner allow to call while writing paper?”, I was surprised

“No, I am calling you from girls room. Hurry up, be there on time”, and the line was cut off

She was sounding happy, excited and moreover romantic.

I ran comb quickly, perfumed the cloths and was out in no time.

I made my way through traffic, zipping between the buses, trucks, cursing the auto-rickshaws, and finally reached to the college just in time. I had hardly parked the bike on side-stand at the college gate just then saw Preeti coming out of the college campus.

She smiled happily and waved her hand.

My whole body was aching for her. I wanted to hug her tightly. I was so happy.

She came close to me and whispered, "Don't think of anything foolish, our HOD is just behind.", while saying so, she pointed her thumb towards two elder woman coming out of the campus.

I recognized one of them. She was the same who stopped me and Neha for the first time.

She looked at me. I bet she recognized me as well. She looked at Preeti and wondered what could be going on. Last time I was with Neha and now with Preeti. She might have decided to ignore and went off.

I was standing well outside the college boundaries and she had no rights to question me this time.

I looked at Preeti.

"Take me somewhere else, far away from this crowd"

As if I was waiting for her to say, I started my bike and drove off.

I looked into the mirror to get a glimpse of her face. Preeti was looking at me into the mirror, smiling.

I kept driving for about 25kms, until I found a narrow road that turned towards the top of the east hill. The thick trees helped the heat go away. It was cold.

At a cliff, I parked the vehicle and we got down. It was windy. The landscape ahead was looking amazing.

"Wow", Preeti said, "You often come here.. with Neha", smiling she said

I angrily looked at her. She was still smiling.

Her hair were moving. Scented wind passed through her hair and I felt divine.

We kept looking at each other, then I stretched my arms. Preeti dropped her bag and hugged me tightly. My hands automatically closed on her back and I squeezed her.

Eyes don't have to wait for the signal from brain to close down. They know how to feel the moment.

After a long time, I let her go.

I put my arms behind her neck, her hands encircling my waist.

"Thank you", I said

"For what?", Preeti asked

"I don't know, but really thank you."

Preeti thought for a moment and then kissed on my cheeks.

I pulled her close and kissed on her lips.

That kiss, there was no hesitation, no hurry, no guilty feelings. It was a pure bliss.

Not that it was my first kiss, but the feelings that I experienced were first time. I felt as if the world around is at halt.... as if I don't exist in this world..... as if all the tensions, problems had vaporized.

"I love you Preetu", later I said, and Preeti said, "You don't have to say it, I can read it in your eyes"

“Do you have anything planned today evening?” , Preeti asked me while returning home

“Whatever you say sweetheart. Your wish is my command” , cheerfully I said

“Alright then you are coming at my place 7.30pm sharp. I want to introduce you to my family” , she said

I had almost forgotten that Preeti have a family.

“Sure, I will be there” , I promised her

Late evening, I was at Preeti’s residence. Her mom greeted me. She was a typical Punjabi lady.

“Aunty, where is Preeti?” , I asked her mom while seating on a sofa.

“She is in her bedroom, with her boyfriend” , her mom said with a smile.

“With whom?” , I almost shouted

Just then Preeti came out.

“Hiee, welcome home Tarun” , she said smiling, and then in my ears she whispered “How is your mother-in-law?”

“Forget that, who is in your bedroom?” I asked

“Aakash, my boyfriend” , without hesitation she said

“What is going on? Your boyfriend is seating next to you, and you are telling him, there is another one in your *bedroom*?” , I was getting restless

Preeti giggled and loudly called Aakash.

Without blinking, I was looking for Aakash to come out.

To my sweet surprise, a 6 year old boy came out running.

Preeti introduced Aakash, her boy-friend, to me and then we laughed.

I wished I could kiss her for the relief that I got. I gathered my lips together to convey my thoughts.

Preeti’s eyes widened.

I folded my hand to beg just a small kiss from my love goddess

She said a BIG NO jerking her neck from left to right, her hair weaving wildly in air.

I got up from my seat, slowly moving towards Preeti to quickly plant a kiss, but just then my future mother-in-law came out with a butter layered paratha.

I moved towards the center table to pretend as if I am picking a magazine.

Preeti controlled her laugh.

“Chuk chuk chuk..”, she made a funny sound and said “Poor baby”

I was furious. I was determined to kiss her, but was helpless.

Just then Preetu’s boyfriend Aakash came out running with a Airoplane toy in his hand.

Vrooom.. he kept running around with a plane in his hand.

Preeti called him close and kissed him on his chubby cheeks, then while arresting her hair behind her ears, she whispered something.

I thought she did this to tease me. How openly and easily her boy-friend Aakash got a kiss but I couldn’t.

Vroom, there the plane started flying again. Aakash made a circle in the air and came close to me. He moved his fingers to ask me bend down. As I did so, he kissed me on my cheeks and ran away.

“Happy?” Preeti did a lip moment to ask me.

So that was the way how she sent her kiss to me.

Aunty was in no mood of stopping with her serving of nicely cooked parathas.

“What is this, you just had 3, have some more!”, she said without giving me a chance to speak.

There you go, one more paratha with a pond of butter on it.

“How much am I supposed to eat, when your mom will stop?”, I asked Preeti softly

“Umm.. atleast 6.. *more!!*”, Preeti said smiling

“How do you manage to stay slim after eating so much butter daily?”, I asked her, but she just shrugged her shoulders.

I ate quietly, while Aakash’s plane was going through turbulence.

When I finished, I really wanted to say Preeti’s mom, the parathas were delicious but was scared that she might will get one more. So I kept quiet.

Preeti’s mom was equally smart. She could have looked like a stunning woman in 30’s if she didn’t have those extra fats on her body.

“Will Preeti look like this when she will be in mid 40s? Or she will carry her grace throughout?” I kept thinking when Preeti’s mom got a full glass Lassi.

I sighed.

I wanted to ask Preeti's mom how much more such glasses I have to push in, just then telephone bell rang.

Her mom ran inside to pick-up the phone.

I was helplessly looking at the Lassi, not sure how to start.

"You want me to help?" Preeti asked me looking straight into my eyes.

"..and how are you going to help me with this?", I asked, frustrated.

She looked around. Distant voice of her mom talking on the phone was coming from one of the room. She quickly got up from the chair, picked the Lassi glass, and drank half of it, stamped it on the table and back to her seat in no time.

I looked at the glass. Tiny drops of Lassi were settling at the base. Preeti's sip made a mark of her lips on the glass.

I turned the glass around and drank the remaining Lassi exactly from where Preeti had it before.

I saw Preeti banging her head with her Palm.

"Aunty, the Lassi was awesome", I told Aunty, looking at Preeti from corner of my eyes.

"You liked it?", her mom asked me merrily.

"Yep!!, I have a sweet tooth. Anything that is sweet is my favorite", I said

"Sweet? But I had made a salty Lassi for you beta", she looked at me weirdly and then went inside.

This time Preeti couldn't hold on her laugh, neither did I. Well, how will Aunty know that the touch of her daughter's lips turned that salty Lassi into a sweet immortal drink?

"Ok aunty, I will make a move, I am getting late", I said loudly.

Her mom came out of the kitchen, drying her wet hands on a piece of cloth.

Preeti, from back of her mom, made funny gestures with her eyes and neck moving from top right to bottom left. I was looking at her not sure what she wanted to communicate.

I bent down and touched her mom's legs, just when I realized.

"Jite reh putter", those were the blessings from a mom, whatever language they are from, mean a lot to any guy or a girl.

I turned and went out of the room.

Preeti came running from behind.

"Watch your steps beta, the lights in the stairs is gone", there came the voice of her mom, but I was already in the middle of the stairs, struggling my way out.

I was able to see a dim light at the end of the stairs. With the help of the wall, I was carefully descending further, just then I felt the warmth of a soft hand.

I could feel the hand was not steady, it was shaking a bit. Preeti was trying to grip her fingers into mine. I knew what that was for.

I turned around and pulled her close to mine. My face was close against hers.

We were exchanging warm breaths. Pin-drop silence.

I took my own time.

A car went from the road, throwing its headlight inside the stairs. In that small flash light, I saw Preeti's face. Her eyes closed, hair covering half of her face were looking beautiful as always.

I thought, *Eve* might have looked like this when *Adam* saw her in some dark cave. No wonder he felt for it and it all started then.

I slide her hair aside.

She flinched a bit.

It was a very intense moment. We were not even a few meters away from Preeti's home. Anybody could have come outside, or from the road and have spotted us. But the two love-birds are in no-fear. They have all the time of the world in their hand.

I moved slowly, closing on her, so close that I could feel the slight movements of her lips. I tried to hold on for some more time. I wanted to feel this moment forever. I wanted to feel the way she had surrendered herself.

Seconds ticked by and it became unbearable for both of us. Not sure who started it first, but we kissed each other passionately for don't know how long.

10

World has always been cruel to lovers. We have seen it in movies, we have heard it from friends, and some of us already have experienced it.

Our love was so fresh and brand new. We were so eager and were trying hard to spend most of our time together. But.....

“Tarun!!!, don’t argue. I don’t want to take a chance with others. You better pack yourself and head towards Bangalore. After all it is just a matter of two weeks, isn’t it?”

My Project manager was in no mood to listen.

It was hardly a week or two passed by since we had shipped our product, and our cruel, devil client already was buzzing with lots of change requests. All were top priority for him.

It could have been a difficult task to listen to him and understand each of it over a phone call. He wanted our company to send someone to do the ‘Requirement Gathering’ quickly, construct a quick PoC and come back to share the knowledge with rest of the team.

It was me, it HAS to be me, who else will go???

It was easy for me to say only two weeks? But it was like a life-sentence to me.

What kind of resource our company was recruiting, that at a crunch time, they only and always see one person?

Somebody in the meeting room was seating with his dirty socks out of the shoes. The ugly smell was quiet irritating, plus the thought of staying away for TWO WEEKS from my angel was frustrating, that I started arguing.

But these smart top level junkies are no less than sniffers. They know whom to pick.

I spread the sad news across to my darling.

Preeti kept quiet for a while, fighting with her emotions and then asked, “When are you going?” and to her shock, I replied that Next day, I have a flight to catch at 10.30 am

“Can we meet in the evening?”, in a slow voice she asked

“Unfortunately, NO”, I said, “I have a night out at the office itself. Need to finish some presentations and have to check out the code again from the branch, build it, and extract some functions out of it...” I was talking nonsense. Preeti had no imagination what I was saying, she slowly replaced the receiver.

Later I called my mom and told her to get some of my cloths in travel bag. I would come home early morning for bath and then leave for airport.

Night was horrible. Thoughts of Preeti kept pondering inside. Her sad face was making circles in front of me, but I was too busy to look at it. I had to finish the work before I proceed to Bangalore.

Somewhere at 3.30 am, I couldn't keep my eyes open. I decided that the remaining pieces of presentation can be covered in a two hrs. flight, whereas the module extraction can be done in an hour or so. I told the watchman to wake-me up by 7am, so that I can finish the remaining and go home.

I badly needed a power nap, so just stretched out on the sofa in the lounge and was asleep in no time.

I might have slept for at the most 2hrs or so when I felt the movement beside.

I felt a soft hand on my fore-head and then moving in my hair.

I thought I was dreaming of either my mom or Preeti trying to wake me up. I pulled the bead-spread over my head and tried to go back to sleep. But the soft touch persisted.

Irritated, I woke up to look around who is it and was shocked to see Preeti face against the dim light, next to me.

I looked into the watch, it was not over 5.20

"Am I dreaming?", I whispered

"No you are not", a fairy spoke into my ears.

I opened my eyes completely. *"Preeti??? What are you doing here???"*

"I wanted to meet you before you go away for two long weeks", she said

"But how did you managed to come here so early? Did you got any auto? What did you tell your parents?"

"Shhhhhh", she put her figure on my lips, *"I have this occasional habit of going out for a jogging you see?"*, she said smiling

"Are you mad? You mean you came here so long jogging?", the distance between her house and my office was surely at-least 8 km, one way.

"Anything for you sweetheart she said...", her eyes filled with love

She came close to me, so close that we can kiss each other.

"Stay away, I haven't had a bath yet", I said

"Even I am not clean, look at me, I am soaking in sweat", she said..

I looked at her, smiled and said, *"You are madly in love with me, aren't you?"*

"Truly, Madly, Deeply", she said, slowly, emphasizing on each word.

She looked around in the dark office.

“Is this the place where you work?” she asked

I nodded.

“It’s terribly hot here, isn’t it? Or is it the jogging that pumped my body heat?” she asked me with a smile. A smile, that now I was aware of. A smile that told me something fishy is going on.

“Now what?” I enquired

“It is too hot Tarun, let me take my T-shirt off for some time”, she said while pulling her T-shirt out of her body.

We both were engaged in passionate kissing even before her T-shirt touched the ground.

11

The moment, I was out of Bangalore airport, I rushed into a STD booth and dialed Preeti's cell number. I could only hear some crazy sounds than the default ringtone. I tried back with no luck.

I thought for a moment, and called her residence number, but to my disbelief, nobody picked it up. It went ringing and ringing.

Frustrated, finally I gave up and called my parents to inform that I reached Bangalore safely.

I wished I had enabled roaming on my cell. Roaming was a luxury in those days. I had thought and rethought on it again and again, and finally decided not to enable it.

I tried calling Preeti's cell first and then her residence number again. But the history repeated.

I was feeling restless for not been able to talk to my cutie pie.

As the queue outside the booth started growing and going restless as well, I pushed the door open like a south-indian film star and went out in the heat cursing.

I had tried my best to keep my face straight after seeing the nagging client. I sincerely wished, if this pig had a wife, soon they would get divorced.

Once in office, a series of meetings and discussions started. By the time the third meeting was half-way I was irritated and frustrated. My mind was only half in the meeting, whereas the other half was thinking why I couldn't reach Preeti.

Finally the lunch time showed up on the clock.

My new Bengaluru friends wanted to order something for me, so that they can eat outside food on the expenses of my account and then get it reimbursed.

But I avoided them all, and ran down-stairs in search of the STD booths.

I kept running in the heat from one *chowk* to another and finally found one.

I tried calling Preeti's cell first and then her residence number with no luck.

Agonized, I returned back to office.

The latter half was much better. Now that I was sure off of some problem with the phones and was convinced that I couldn't do anything about it, I tried to concentrate on the work. The best thing for me would be to finish the work in less than two weeks and run back to my lovely lady.

When I reached back to hotel I tried onc more time, but same problem persisted.

Late night I called home to inform them everything is alright and slept.

I must be dreaming about Preeti, because I woke up late.

I looked at the phone on the table, but then decided not to try and get frustrated.

Office was as usual. I finally started understanding what the super-hero client want. I kept jotting down his suggestions.

Afternoon, again I went to the same STD booth which was two *chouwks* far and called my mom.

After a usual gup-shup, mom said, "Tarun, your friend was here."

Not aware of which of my friend landed at my place, I asked "Friend? Who?"

To my surprise, my mom said, "Preeti!, such a sweet girl!"

I was awestricken.

"What was she doing there?" I tried to add an extra anger in my voice.

"She wanted some help from yours in her project submission. Everybody is not like you in computers. Poor girl", my mom said

"So she could have called me na.", I said

"She wanted to, but the road digging outside her home cut the cable of her telephone dead and her cell, it seems her neighbor, a small kid dropped it into a water bucket", mom laughed as she spoke

I instantly knew who that little kid was.

So the mystery of not been able to reach her was resolved.

"She said, she will use your computer with your permission for couple of days", my mom added

I was so.. so proud of my love. She was doing everything to get in touch with me.

"NO mom, don't ever let her touch my computer", I shouted, showing as if I strongly disagree.

"What Tarun, she is not going to harm the machine. Anyways you are not here, what if she use it for some basic work?"

I was wondering what Preetu did to convince mom.

"She will be here by 7.30 evening. I have told her, by this time you usually call home. Talk to her and tell her how to use the computer. Ok?"

I said, it is *okay*.

I came out of the STD booth jumping with joy.

"Preetu, you are such a darling jaar", I said to myself.

I called home, 7.30 pm.. sharp.

Although I wanted to ask *“Is Preeti around?”*, as the first question, I didn’t

“Alright mom, cya, take care”, I added the concluding statements..

“Wait..” mom said.. *“here she comes”*, I thought, my heart pounding

“Talk to Preeti, she is waiting here since long”, my mom said.

I could see my mom smiling and giving the receiver to Preeti

After a brief second a sweet voice came online, *“Hieeee”*

“Mwaahaa.. Mwaahaa... Mwaahaa..”, I couldn’t control but kept kissing on the phone

“Ok.. hmm.. ok.. in which directory?.. okay.”, Preeti kept saying from the other side as if I am instructing her something.

“I love you sweetheart; I missed you so much... Please do something with your phone”, I said

“yes yes.. got it. I will need your PC only 2 days. Work should be done in two days. Thank you so much. Yes yes, I will take care not to delete anything”, Preeti kept talking in the secret code

“Hey Mr. James Bond, Double-0-seven”, I thought, *“You are not the only one with beautiful and brainy secret agents*

“So the password is...”, I was about to tell when she whispered, *“ I know the password”*.

What else could be the password for my PC than the name of the lady I was madly in love with.

I hugged the receiver tightly.

After the call, I felt so glad, so rejuvenated that I started jumping and rolling in the bed with happiness.

It took almost 3 days for her phones to come back to life . Although we were directly connected now, we could hardly talk for a long time. With her landline, she couldn’t talk much as there was a fear of being overheard by someone. In the era Where the incoming calls were also charged, and charged heavily, for the STD incoming, the monetary limitation blocked us for long – long distance calls.

With so much of limitations, the time was passing slowly. I felt like I was in Bangalore for ages. But finally the work got over and I booked my flight tickets for the return journey, a journey back to my love.

I was thinking of my last conversation with Preeti.

“So? Finally you are coming tomorrow”, Preeti couldn’t hide the joy in her voice

“Yes, finally. I have a flight at 10.30am, I will reach somewhere between 12.45-1”, I said

“So how are you coming from Airport?” She asked me

“My company already have booked a cab for me from airport to home”, I informed

“Then cancel it”, she said

“Cancel what?”, confused I said

“The Cab stupid”, She said

“Why? And how will I come home then?. Airport is at-least 30kms away from the city. Auto-rikshaws are not affordable”, I was still not getting why she want me to cancel the A/C cab

“Because I’m saying so. Tomorrow, you will have a royal pick-up and drop service.”, I heard her giggling

“Like what?”, I was curious to know what royal thing will it be?

“Well, Princess Preeti herself will be there at the airport to pick you with her royal vehicle TVS Scooty”, she continued to giggle

“Are you mad?”, I asked, “With my big stroller how do you think we will fit in that poor scooty?”

“That I don’t know. I want to be the first person to meet you and that’s what I care about.”, she said

“Are baba, but it’s a noon time, why do you want to travel?”, I was worried about her actually.

“Aye!, bak-bak band kar, you are on the phone, otherwise I know how to shut your mouth”, she said

“Really? And how will you do that?”, I asked her

I could feel her blushing

She kept quiet for a while and then changing topic she said, “I have got a new set of bangles and a bindi and new sandles and earrings..” her list was endless

“For what?”

“For my prince charming is coming home”, she said

“Preetu.. I was away just for 2 weeks”, I said

“For you it was just two weeks. Do you have any idea how much I suffered here without you?” a fake anger tone in her voice

“Ok baba, I am sorry, chalo give me a kiss before we cut the phone”, I said convincing her

“No, I won’t”, she said

“Pleasee...”

“No”

“I won’t cut the line unless you send me one across” I said

“NO I won’t. Spare it till you are here” and she kept the receiver down.

I was thinking all this to myself, and smiling.

My destination was approaching and I was already feeling good. I was feeling the love everywhere. I could see it on the back of the seats, I could see it on the wings of the plane, I could see it written on the clouds and along the breeze.

I was feeling romantic and because of that, my love towards Preetu was growing more.

I started feeling impatient just then captain announced that the plane landing process will start in 10 minutes.

I hurriedly crossed the baggage section and went into the corridor. You could spot her from a distance. She was looking gorgeous, far better than the plastic coated air-hostesses from the plane. She was wearing a full sleeves white salwar kameez with a pale pink dupatta around. Her dress was tightly wrapped around her body highlighting her perfect figure. At-least half a dozen bangles in each hand, glittering silver color sandals. But the best thing was her ever-lasting million dollar smile.

With both her hands engaged in playing around with the end of her dupatta, she was looking anxiously at the exit.

I felt back to life again.

Once I was out, she came running towards me.

I smiled back. “Kaisa hain mera dost?”, I asked

“Chee.. what kind of hindi you are talking?”, she said

“Why? what happened?”

“You should use feminine words right? You should say kaisi hain meri dost?”

“So what’s wrong in that if I don’t say it that way?”

“Okay, whatever you say”, she said and took away stroller from my hand and started walking.

“What? I can take care of my luggage”, I said

“No need, I will keep the bag away from you now. She was already with you since last two weeks and I was not”, furiously she said

“Don’t tell me, you are jealous of my poor little bag”, I said smiling

“I’m. Do whatever you can”, she kept moving towards the parking

I wrapped my hands around her waist and pulled her close to me.

“Hello.. Mr... you are back to your home-town. And if you must know, this is a public place”, she said escaping away from me.

“Is it? Well then please take me to some private place, I am starving” Pulling her cheek I said

“I know what kind of starving you have. I am not taking you anywhere. We will just go to hotel and eat. Then you will go home and take rest. You are looking tired. We will meet in the evening”, she already had decided, so there was no question of me interfering.

It was a fun to ride along on a scooty with a big travel bag. I had to try hard to balance the bag between. We had to stop occasionally for me to get down and relax the twisted muscles. But with my love aside, there was no pain at all.

We stopped at a hotel to have our lunch. While Preeti ordered, I went to washroom to clear my sweating face.

“I really missed you shonu!!”, Preeti said sadly, “Please don’t ever leave me for so long”

Girls always have some crazy names for their boy-friends. Without much of a fuss, I was named *shonu* today. I thanked god for a decent name than pappu, babloo, pintu or chintu.

We sat silently for long time, not sure what to talk. There were so many things to say, but heart was overfilled with joy of seeing each other after a *long* time, that we couldn’t speak.

After-a-while, she said, “Say something na”

So many sad, alone memories that I was filled with were gone now. I remembered something. I took out my mp3 player from my bag, scrolled through the play list and played a song that I had decided I’ll play for Preeti

“Listen to this sweetheart. The lyrics is exactly what I wanted to tell you”.

We put the headphone plugs in and listened it together.

These were the lyrical of the song

*I like the feel of your name on my lips
And I like the sound of your sweet gentle kiss
The way that your fingers run through my hair
And how your scent lingers even when you're not there
And I like the way your eyes dance when you laugh
And how you've convinced me to dance in the rain
With everyone watching like we were insane*

*But I love the way you love me
Strong and wild, slow and easy
Heart and soul so completely
I love the way you love me*

*And you roll your eyes when I'm slightly off key
And I like the innocent way that you cry
At sappy old movies you've seen thousands of times*

*And I could list a million things
I love to like about you
But they could all come down to one reason
I could never live without you..*

I could see the wetness in her eyes. She took out a pen from her purse and pulled my palm in front of her. Then she drew two hearts clanged to each other and beside those two hearts she wrote –

“I WANT TO SPEND MY LIFE TIME LOVING YOU..”

Now it was my turn to have wet eyes.

Number *thirteen*, supposed to be an unlucky number, isn't it?

Preeti called me in the afternoon and asked me to come home, she had planned a surprise for me.

I agreed only on one condition, that there should not be butter coated parathas.

When I reached home, Princess Preeti opened the door. She looked funny though. Floor mill was all over her face.

"What are you up to?" I asked

"Surprise!!!", she said and went into kitchen

"That's true, but what is it?"

"I am preparing a cake", and looking around she said "*just for you*"

Preetu pushed the cake into the oven and came out. Just then my cell phone rang.

I looked into the window to see who is calling and was surprised to see Neha's number flashing on screen.

I was in dilemma whether to pick it or to keep it ringing.

Preeti was looking at me and then the cell which was ringing constantly.

"Who is calling?", she asked

"Neha", I said

We kept looking at each other when the ringing stopped and started again.

Finally I picked it up, "Hey Neha, what a surprise!", I said

"Hie Tarun, how are you??" Neha said with a heavy voice

"I am just fine, kaho kaise yaad kiya?"

"I wanted to meet you Tarun. In fact I wanted to meet you and Preeti", she said

I kept quiet

"I really wanted to apologies for whatever happened that day.", Neha continued to talk, "Where are you right now? Can we meet?"

Not sure what to say, I said, "I am at Preeti's place"

Preeti's eyes widened. She gestured me not to tell her, but I already had.

"Wow that's great. I will see you there in 20 minutes". Before I could say anything, she disconnected the call.

"Why did you told her you are here?", Preeti asked me trying to keep cool as much as she can

"What could I do, I couldn't recollect a place where I can be at this time", guilty cautious, I said, "she wanted to apologies for that day and wanted to meet both of us. So..."

"So what Tarun??", Preeti was about to scream at me

"So.. she is coming here.", with head-down, I said

"F***", Preeti said, "You should not have told her in first place. This was the evening I wanted to spend with you and now she will be here and she will spoil everything"

I hated myself for telling Neha about this.

"Ok, let me call her and tell that I am leaving now, we can meet together", picking up my phone I said.

"NOOOO, let it be now. It will look bad", Preeti said

Oven whistled after some time. Preeti looked disappointed. I guess she had planned lot many things, which almost looked disastrous now.

"It's okay Preetu, after all she *was* our friend, isn't it? And she said she is sorry for what had happened. She sounded like she really meant it. Let's hope for the best. She might will turn this evening into a joyful moment", I tried to make the situation better.

"Hmm", she said and went into kitchen to take out the cake.

I should have understood that for me Neha was a friend now, but for Preeti, Neha was my *ex*-girlfriend and no girl would like to spend her planned romantic evening in presence of *ex*-girlfriend of her boyfriend!!!!

In less than 20 minutes the front door bell ranged.

We both exchanged glances. Preeti pointed me towards the door to open it and she rushed into the kitchen.

I was very sure that something was wrong with her.

I opened the door, trying to smile, facing Neha after almost a month.

"Hiee Tarun", Neha said hugging me.

Preeti had to come out at the same time.

To make situation worse, Neha didn't hug Preeti.

"Hie Preeti, am I disturbing you?", she asked with a conning voice.

"What yaar.. no not at all. You don't even have to ask me before coming to my place", Preeti tried to force a smile

Yummy smell of cake was floating everywhere.

"Wow, you were baking cake for Tarun?", Neha asked.

Her taunting voice was torturing me.

"I am baking it for all of *US*", Preeti said encircling her hand and went inside, without saying much.

"Is she not happy seeing me? Should I go?", Neha asked me

"No, nothing like that. Once you apologies for whatever happened, she will be alright", I said

"Apologies? For what? I had thought of saying sorry earlier, but now seeing what is going on here, I think I was little soft on what I said that day", Neha said in a loud voice so that Preeti could hear it.

Preeti, as if standing near the door of the kitchen came out.

"And what is going on here by the way?", She asked Neha

"Do you want me to say it all? Can't I see nobody is at home, you busy cooking food for *my* boyfriend.."

"Hello.. what is this again with *my* boyfriend? Did you forget you are married now. Whatever was between you and Tarun was a past and you both have mutually separated now?"

"So what is between you and Tarun now?", Neha snapped

"If you must know, he is my boyfriend. Do you have a problem?", Preeti was quick on her toes

"Well, I don't have any problem as such, but Tarun, did you tell your parents ?", Neha asked me

I had nothing to answer then.

The fight could have gone worse just then the doorbell rang. Preeti's mom was back from market. She was surprised to see Neha after a long long time.

"Neha!! What a surprise. How are you beta?"

"I am fine aunty. Everybody is fine".

More jealousy than anger was dripping from her face. I exchanged glances with Preeti. We both were worried that Neha might will say something about us that will spoil everything. But to our surprise, Neha decided to leave.

Preeti's mom tried to stop her at-least for snacks, but she was in no mood to listen.

The yummy smell was noticeable. Her mom asked, "what are you baking beta?"

I could see tear drops gathering in Preeti's eyes.

"Nothing mom, I was experimenting with cake, but it went wrong. Please throw it in trash", Preeti said controlling her emotions

"Do you want to come for a quick walk?", I asked Preeti.

She shook her head. Her nose was getting red.

"Alright then, I will leave home, see you tomorrow", I said

She looked at me for a second and then rolled her eyes down.

"Did i let you down sweetie?", i thought, "I am really sorry if i had done that. I promise you, this will be the first and the last time that your eyes will feel the touch of your tears. I am really sorry"

Preeti looked back at me as if she read what is going on in my mind. She forced a smile on her face, just for me to feel better.

I waved my hand and without saying anything left for the stairs.

She nodded and went inside her room.

I felt really bad for her. Without her mom around, I could have hugged her and could have cooled her down. But now I was helpless.

She had to cry... alone!!!!

Next day morning, I decided to call Neha.

It was the time to pay back for what she did to MY girlfriend.

"Hey Tarun",Neha picked up the phone in just two rings

"Hi Neha", slowly i said

"What happen Tarun? Why are you sounding so low?"

"Nothing", I said

"NO, tell me what happened. Did your new girlfriend fight with you yesterday? I know, she must have. She is like that only"

"Shut up Neha"

"No Tarun, I won't. I know you are not at fault. She stole you away. I am repeating it Tarun, you won't be happy with her"

"Listen Neha..." I tried to cut her off

"No Tarun, you listen to me first.", Neha continued to speak, "Remember how happy we were together? How pretty the world was then. A world of just you and me. What happened now?"

"Neha you are married now, and we've broke off.."

Neha stopped me again.. "Hey!!, agreed I am married, but i don't think so we broke off. I never said that, neither you did."

"Come on Neha, why does either of us have to say it? Isn't it a common sense?", I asked

"Why do we have to break off Tarun? Can't we be the same what we were couple of months back?"
Neha asked

"What are you talking Neha? Are you forgetting the things lately? You are *MARRIED* now", I screamed in the mouth piece

"So what Tarun? Can't girls have extra marital affairs? We had decided that we won't get married to each other, which was okay. But we never decided that we can't be the same after."

"Neha you are talking insane. I called you to say something else, but looks like there is no point talking to you", i said, depressed

"You still love me Tarun, don't you?. I know you are not happy with Preeti and her emotional drama. I know you were sad and in grief when i got married. Preeti might have offered her shoulder. She knows how to catch guys with their sentiments.

I don't blame you Tarun, in that situation, any guy could have felled for her trick", Neha kept talking bad things about Preeti, "She is no less than a whore.."

"SHUT UP NEHA", I screamed in the top of my voice. I am sure my whole building and probably a whole Wing would have heard my voice.

I was shivering with anger.

"I am done with you Neha, if this is what you want to hear. I am breaking it with you for whatever we had in past. Listen to me very carefully. You are my past now, Preeti is my present and she will be my future.

I don't want to hear a single word neither from you nor from anybody against her."

"Tarun please.." Neha was saying something, her voice shaky, but i had already disconnected the call before she could continue speaking her trash.

Phone rang within a couple of seconds. I knew Neha was calling. I picked-up the receiver and put it down again.

Phone started ringing again.

I pulled the phone cable out and threw the telephone on sofa furiously. Then lift the magazines from the center table and tossed them in air.

I was literally frustrated, not sure what to do. I started pacing back and forth in the hall, one hand on my waist, the other on my head, moving through the hair. I was breathing heavily, trying to control my racing heart-beats.

Sound of door-bell halted me. I looked at wall-clock. It cannot be Neha. She won't be able to reach my place so soon. It surely cannot be Mom. She is out to her Sisters' place for preparation of my nephew's naming ceremony. I heard it's going to be a huge one in next month, as they had a baby after 7 years of married life.

"If it is a sales-man, then he/she is going to have a hard time today", i thought and opened the door

I was surprised to see Preeti standing outside. Pale-yellow Salwar Kameez, Peacock colored dupatta that was well contrasting to her dress, pale rose color lipstick, and usual matching accessories like earrings and bangles to support her get-up. I noticed how stunning she looked even with a simple dress-up.

I was hypnotized that I almost forgot to welcome her home, and stood in doorway.

"Can I?" Preeti asked me

"Oh.. sorry", I said and opened the door for my angel.

She looked around. Various magazines on floor, phone instruments mouth piece, lying on sofa divorced to its base.

"Is Aunty home?", she looked enquiringly

I shook my head

"What happened?", she started picking up the magazines from the floor and arranged them neatly on the center table. Pulled the telephone instrument together, and hooked it to the wire, Re-arranged the pillows of the sofa and chairs.

Then she opened her purse and took out a fresh Yellow colored 'gerbera'. The flower was beautiful, but i thought Preeti looked heavenly beautiful in her yellow out-fit.

Poor flower, it doesn't know with whom it was trying to compete.

I took it from her, not sure what to do with it. She looked at me for a while and then took that flower back and arranged it in the flowerpot, which was lying in the corner.

"Are!!, kya hua? Care to tell me? Why you look so upset?", she asked me while arranging herself with grace on a sofa-chair.

I slid myself on the sofa, not able to decide whether to tell her or not. I thought I should tell her, I don't want to hide anything from her.

"I had called Neha", I said

A hint of irritation flashed on her face and went away quickly

There was a pause for a moment.

She walked up to me and sat on the handle of the sofa, close to me, her toes barely touching the top of sofa cushion.

She was looking at me, aware how upset I was. She was no more worried about her problem. She was worried because i was upset.

"Do you want to talk about it?", she asked me, touching my chin

I nodded.

"Okay, get dressed, i wanted to take you somewhere.", she said

"Where?", I asked

"Get dressed quickly, you will come to know...", she said while turning on the TV set.

I felt good seeing how comfortable she was at my home. If things go good, soon she will be right here as Mrs. Tarun.

I smiled and went inside to change.

Few minutes later, we were standing in front of the gate, a gate of "Gurudwara"

I saw her removing her sandals. She pulled her odhani on her head, then closed her eyes and stood there with her hands folded.

"Is this how fairy's look?", I was looking at her without blinking eyelashes

After a while, Preeti opened her eyes and asked me to follow her.

The moment we were in, instantly i felt quiet at heart. I was feeling better than before. There was so much of calmness around. I was not used to the customs, so i followed what Preeti was doing..

We bent and touched the ground with our forehead. Then we prayed with our eyes closed.

When we were done, we went outside. Preeti took me to a corner of Gurudwara where a very old man white beard was seated with his eyes closed. I thought he might be some priest.

We stood there in front of him without saying a word.

He noticed us and opened his eyes. A smile came on his face when he sighted Preeti.

"Tuhaadaa kee haal hai jee", That priest, or whoever he was, asked to Preeti

" Meraa haal theek hai", Preeti politely replied, then pointing towards me she said "This is Tarun"

"Sat siri akal", he said looking at me

Not aware of what to say in reply, i just bent down with folded hands

Then Preeti whispered something to that Priest. He smiled and then he took out a red-yellow colored thread from his pocket and tied it to Preeti's left hand. Once done, he took out another thread and tied it to my right hand.

We bent down once again, then went to the other corner and sat on a lawn. Preeti sat close to me with her legs crossed.

"What is this for?", i asked Preeti pointing towards the thread

"Nothing, this will protect you from bad things", she said looking elsewhere

I wondered if that bad thing meant Neha.

"So tell me what happened in your call?", Preeti asked me

I told her everything. I thought Preeti will be upset after that. But to my surprise she was cool as usual.

"In the first place, you should not have called her", she said after a brief pause

"I wanted to pay her back for whatever happened yesterday", I said

"And why do you have to do that?", she asked, a naughty smile in her eyes

"Because she abused my sweet-heart who also soon will be my wife."

I saw Preeti blushing.

"*Mai taunu piyar karna*", she said looking down on the lawn, her hands busy picking up the tiny grass leafs.

"Now??", I almost screamed

"What Now?", surprised, she said

"The thing you said", I replied

"What did i said?"

"*Mai taunu piyar karna*, isn't that mean *Muze tumse pyar karna hain??* i.e. I want to make love to you?", confused, i asked

"Offoh.. NO Tarun, that means *I love you*", she said giggling

She kept looking at me, a smile on her face.

"What?" I asked

"Kasla gode aahes tu!!", she said blushing

"Excuse me", my jaw half open, "How do you know marathi?"

"I am learning.." she said

"For what?", surprised I asked

"Because my sweet sweet would-be husband and my would be in-laws speak marathi", still smiling she said

Did anybody tell you that guys never blush? If so, let me tell you, it is completely wrong. Look at me, i am blushing.

While sipping the coffee at the coffee-bar, I looked at the wrist watch.

Preeti would be here any minute.

Couple of minutes passed by and I saw Preeti coming out of her college campus. She was holding the mark-list in her hand. It was her result day.

When I dropped her at the college gate, she was tense.

"I am scared Tarun, I don't want to flunk. I want to finish my graduation quickly", she said

"Why do you think you will flunk dear? You have studied hard, haven't you?" I asked

Truly speaking, even I was tense. I wanted her to score at-least a first-class, so that we both can try to impress my mom about her results. What will I do, if she is failed in her exam?

I tried to hide my emotions.

"No Tarun, I haven't studied that great, I couldn't", she said, embarrassed

"And why is that?", I asked

"The answer is You Tarun. You were in all my books, smiling and teasing me. How do you expect me to remember the answers and score high?", she had said it while entering in the college campus.

Looking at her happy face, I felt better at least she seems to have passed the exam.

"Tarunnnn", she stretched my name while waiving her score-card, "I have passed the exam". She was almost shouting.

People around were gazing her.

I got up from my seat and went on the road to greet her. Just then I noticed something. A car was racing with speed towards Preetu. I could spot the driver busy talking on cell. I was sure enough that he haven't spotted Preeti who was in the middle of the road crossing.

I shouted.. "Preetu... look on your left" While saying so I ran on the road to move her aside. I heard a loud horn followed by a heavybrake sound. I saw the dashing car has already passed Preeti and she was safe, standing on the divider. But what I missed to see was a mini-truck which was indeed very close to me. When I noticed, it was too late to move aside. The bonnet of the truck hit me with lots of horse-power.

I was thrown high in the air and then was dumped on the cement road with heavy force.

Within a second, I felt a flow of warm blood coming out from back of my head and from my jaw. I saw Preeti screaming with both her hands on her lips.

I saw people gathering around.

I had a blur vision. I felt Preeti close to me now, shaking me, shouting my name. I saw her trying to stop vehicles to take me hospital. She was screaming, crying - helpless and then I lost my consciousness.

After a long long time, I was half-awake. I tried opening eyes, but couldn't. I absolutely had no power to do a slightest of the movement.

I heard someone was trying to cool down Preeti, who was still crying with a worried face. Somebody was telling her that I would be alright.

I was feeling sad with lots of pain. The pain was not for me but for Preeti. I couldn't see my sweetie crying.

How much I loved her. What will I do without her in my life? I had a sudden urge of getting well soon. I wanted to feel better so that Preeti will feel better.

Sharp pain triggered from my leg and through my back. I was unconscious again.

Preeti told me the good news and the bad news when I finally gained consciousness. Good news was that there was no danger or threat to my life. I was perfectly all right. Blood loss has caused a lot of weakness, but that was all right, I soon will be up, *though won't be moving that fast*. And the reason was I had a huge plaster on my left leg. Doc said the bones almost crushed into pieces and it will take some time to recover.

My leg was all covered with plaster, starting with knee; it went all down to my toe.

With Preeti standing aside, the disgusting hospital room with green curtains and white bed-sheets also looked better and I felt pleasant.

"Oh my poor baby, what happened to you?", Preeti said when she looked at me.

I was in a crumpled t-shirt and shorts, hair scattered, tiny rough hair showing on my face as I hadn't shaved since a day or two. By all means, I was looking like a *poor baby*.

Preeti came and sat close to me. She looked at the plaster with worried expressions.

Scarily, she touched the plaster with so much of delicateness as if a bit rough touch and I will shout with pain.

I noticed that she was trying to avoid eye contact with me.

“What happened Preetu? Anything wrong?”, I tried to raise her face up

She shook her head, her hair waiving wildly in air.

“Don’t lie to me. What’s up?” I asked again

Preeti rested her head on my chest. I thought she was about to cry. Her nose blending into pink color.

“It’s all because of me, isn’t it?”, still looking down she said.

So that was the problem, I thought

“It’s ok Preetu..”

“No it’s not Okay Tarun, it’s not ok. I was so careless while crossing, i should have died than...”

“Shut up Preeti”, I shouted and tried to seat up, but the pain in my legs and back prevented me from do so.

“I can’t see you lying helplessly on this sofa, with so much of a pain to sustain. Get well soon my sweet heart”, she managed to say the last words somehow and then broke into tears.

Mom came in. She looked at Preeti as if she had done biggest crime on the earth.

Preeti couldn’t look back. She was already feeling the guilt. She sat there for a while and then went outside.

“What is she doing here?”, mom asked, looking at the room door who was still in the process of closing

“Mom, don’t treat her like that. It was not her fault anyways. “, I tried to convince

“As if I will believe”, mom said, “ Police told us that you went on the road blindly to save her. That’s what the witness people also told”

“No mom, that is half-truth, anyways..”

I was discharged after a week or so. My parents were with me when I came out of the hospital. I was limping, not able to walk on one leg. I wished I could hold Preeti, but in the presence of my parents, the only support I had was of the ward-boy.

“So what about office now? How are you are going back to work?”, mom asked me when I was back at home.

“I won’t be able to go to office, I will be working from home.”

“But nobody will be at home. Vimala’s function is in couple of weeks, I have to be there as well. Lot of things are still pending.”

“Don’t worry mammaji, I will take care”, Preeti said

Mom wanted to say things, but she had no other alternative.

Preeti offered her helping hand by staying with me most of the time. Initial few days, I was still feeling very weak. The dope was causing a dizziness.

“How does it feel now?” she asked me looking I am awake

“Much better”, I said. With Preeti near me, why won’t I?

We were chit-chatting when phone bell rang. My mom was calling

“How are you Tarun?”, mom asked

“I am fine”, casually I answered

“I will come home in an hour or so and cook something for you”, mom said

“No mumma, don’t worry. You don’t have to come here all the way.”

“But what will you eat?”, mom asked me

“Mom, Preeti is here, we will manage something”

Mumma kept thinking for a while and then she told me to give the phone to Preeti.

“Mumma”, I whispered and gave the phone to Preeti

“Namaste Mumma ji”, Preeti spoke on the phone... “Sure mammaji, tell me”

“Sure mammaji, I can cook”, as Preeti was saying this.. I said to myself.. “*there you go..*”

I thought mumma was giving some instructions while Preeti kept saying “Haan ji”

These Punjabi people, how nicely they say “Haan ji”, it feels so good to hear, especially when girls are saying it. My Preetu sounded cutest when she said that.

After a brief discussion, the line went dead.

“What happened?”, curiously I asked

“Nothing, stay here, I will cook something for you”, she said

Once Preeti went inside, I pulled my laptop ahead and dialed the VPN to office.

Preeti kept working in kitchen for some time. I could hear sounds of utensils, fridge door opening and closing, mixer, oven and all other stuff, which generally my mom uses.

I had a terrible desire to go inside and help Preetu. It would have been a treat to watch her working in my kitchen, *our* kitchen.

In less than 45 minutes, Preeti came out with a plate in hand. I don't have to peep into the plate for the food. The aroma was too much for me to tell the food is delicious.

She sat close to me. She held a spoon in hand, filled it with the freshly cooked jeera rice and a hot daal.

I was feeling like more than a king.

"Food is delicious Preetu", while munching it I said

"Thank you shonu", she said while serving me

While connected to my office network, I explained her kind of work I do, what is ERP system, where it is used. What is my job role etc etc. Preeti, occasionally nodding head, kept looking at the screen with curiosity.

When I was done with lunch, she collected the plate and went inside again. Within a minute she came out looking for something. She forgot the glass outside. When she was about to go inside again, I caught her hand and pulled her close. I forced her to seat close to me.

My office VPN got disconnected because of time-out as I haven't touched it since last 20 minutes. We both were in some kind of trance, feeling the warmth of our loved ones.

I must have slept like a baby. When I woke up, it was almost close to 5.20pm. Preeti was busy reading a book. She was instantly on feet when she saw me woke-up.

"Hey darling, how was your sleep? Did you dream of me?", she asked .

I smiled and stretched my hand to reach her. She held my hand and squeezed it lightly.

"Preetu", I said, "Whatever happens, you will be mine, *forever*, No matter what I have to do, no matter how I will do it, I will marry you for sure. It is a gentleman's promise."

Preeti bite her lower lip gently and said, "We have time to think about it, don't worry now, get well soon"

"I will leave now, *with your permission*", Preeti said

"Sure preetu, go home and take rest"

We hugged each other.

“See you tomorrow”, that’s what she said while closing the door.

I slept back on sofa, eyes closed, felt so relaxed. I loved the caring and pampering provided by Preeti.

Blinking light of laptop, showing dying battery, reminded me of my pending work. I pulled the laptop and connected back to vpn to finish assigned tasks.

At dinner, dad complimented mom for the dal and jeer rice, which Preeti cooked. Mom told him about Preeti and the help offered by her.

“These punjabi’s certainly know how to cook”, I said while chewing the delicious food.
“No wonder, Punjabi food is so popular over the world”, dad said nodding

“It is not like that, even Maharashtrian food is equally popular”, Mom said disapproving us.

Mom kept talking about the preparations that were taking place for the naming ceremony which eventually cut Preeti’s topic.

Next day, Mom stayed back at home.

By 11.30, many of my relatives showed up to see me and my broken leg. Everybody was curious to look at the plaster and right down their ‘*get well soon*’ messages on it.

Preeti came home by 12.45. She was surprised to see so many people at home, especially when she was expecting no-one.

“So you are the sweet accidental disaster is it?”, one of my cousin asked. While my aunty asked her,
“Are you the city library girl?”

“Yes, why?”, surprised, Preeti asked

“I remember you”, Aunty said, “You helped me to get the Sanjeev Kapoor’s cooking book ahead of the queue.”

“You only had to tell me you are relative of Tarun and I could have brought the book even before that book leaved the publication house”

Preeti must have thought that. I read her mind clearly. She looked at me and I looked back into her eyes.

You see, this is a very secretive language that every person in love knows how to speak. Nobody has to teach it, you fall in love and you will start speaking thousand words without saying it actually. You convey your emotions through your eyes.

“You are soo cute”, my another teenage cousin complimented Preeti.

I introduced Preeti to all my relatives as my friend. My super-talkative aunty asked naughtily “Just a friend?”

“Of-course Vimala”, my mom cut her off, “She is friend of Tarun. Tarun helped her in her computer project and that is why she is helping him back. After all she is Punjabi”

“So what? World is at doorstep now. People are getting married with a bride / groom staying seven seas across”, aunty replied

“It’s not, *that is why*, Preeti is helping me mom”, I thought to say.

Preeti, my aunts and cousin sisters soon found a common area of interest, some pathetic daily soaps to discuss and later mom too joined them. My broken leg was no more their problem now. They had a bigger problem to discuss, shanti was kicked out of her house, somebody’s in-laws were playing some con game whereas some Kapoor was about to be betrayed by his business partner.

I sighed and pulled my laptop to check my inbox.

It was then the usual practice for everybody. With mom out for the naming ceremony preparation, Preeti took care of household. Mom was not that comfortable with Preeti, for the reason that she was the cause of my accident. On the other hand, my dad got used to her quickly. When he and Preeti were together, I could see them chit-chatting and enjoying the time.

One day they actually ordered chicken. My mom is a pure veg and she can’t even stand for eating non-veg in home. But with mom’s absence it was we who ruled the home.

It was a strike of Public transport and auto-rickshaws in demand of increase in fair rates. It was a unplanned strike and lot many people suffered because of the sudden non-availability of transports. My mom was one of them. She had a plan of going to market for usual retail purchases as well as the gifts purchases to be given on the naming ceremony. That includes saree, cloths, jewelry, kids outfits and other usual stuff. She was frustrated that she won’t be able to finish the work as planned.

I secretly signaled Preeti asking if she is okay to go with her.

For rest of the day mom and Preeti were out in the market. I was able to move around *conveniently*, as the plaster was taken off.

When they came back, they both looked tired, their hands filled with lots of shopping bags. They were constantly talking about the shopping, the sarees that they liked but hadn’t bought, the discounts that they got etc. etc.

“Thank you Preeti”, my mom said holding hand of Preeti in one hand. “I certainly do get bored at times shopping all alone. It was fun to be with you. And your tiny scooty helped a lot as well.”

“No problem mummi jee”, Preeti said, “Even I like shopping. Call me next time you get bored and we will go together.”

They both giggled.

“Can’t you wait for the dinner tonight?”, mom asked looking at the watch. It was close to 8.30

“No mummi jee, mom will be waiting home. She must be ready with the dinner and it will go waste if I don’t show up”, Preeti said

Preeti left, closing the door behind. I was about to pull the laptop ahead when my mobile beeped. There was one sms splitted into couple of one from Preeti that read, “There is this blue textured shirt in one of the gift-wrap that mumma got it for your cousin as a gift. I just loved that shirt, and I am sure it will suite you. We can buy another for your cousin”

No need to tell ya, I stole that shirt 😊

Things looked to be back on track, *for a while*, until that day.

I was working on providing the documentation to testing team when Preeti came in. She looked around to make sure that nobody is at home and then quickly jumped closed to me.

See this; she pointed me towards her tiny glittering nose-ring.

“Liked it?”, she asked me curiously.

It really looked awesome.

I was about to say something, just then it thundered outside.

I touched the ring gently and nodded.

It thundered again and in no time it started pouring. Preeti ran into the balcony to get a splash of rain water on her face. She came in with a pool of water in her hand and sprinkled some on my face.

“Wish you a very happy rain sweetie”, she said jumping with excitement.

“Do you know, this is the first rain of our lovely relationship? I wish we were in that rain together, hanging to each other.” She said dreamily.

“Come, let’s go”, I said pushing my laptop aside.

“Go? Where Tarun?” she said

“Terrace, let’s get drenched”, I said while getting up from my seat.

“Are you insane? Do you think your plaster is water-proof or what?”, she said pointing to my plaster.

“Hell with the plaster, we will get another one fixed. This is our first rain, and I don’t want to miss it”, I said pulling her towards the door.

We both went in the open-terrace, feeling the heavy water drops. The icy breeze was never so beautiful before. We stood there, eyes closed, holding each other, welcoming the rain. In no time, we were soaking wet.

Preeti held my hand and wrote “*I luv u*” using the water beads. I don’t know why girls want to do such crazy things, but let me tell you, this feels special. With the touch of her nails, her soft hand, I shivered.

We stood there for more than 15 minutes and then went back to our nest.

“Wait here, I will quickly change.” I said.

“Why do you have to go inside Tarun? You can change here. Are you feeling shy?”, Preeti said impishly.

“Well, you asked for it, don’t say I haven’t warned you”, saying that I pulled my T-shirt out and thrown it at her.

Just then we heard the door clicking and mom came in.

I was standing top-less. Mom looked at us, first to me then at Preeti and then back at me. Preeti was standing there; her face fixed looking down at her toes, not sure what to say or what to do. Water drops were sopping from her silky hair.

We stood there for approx. 2-3 awkward moments. Preeti slowly kept my T-shirt on sofa, then without looking up, picked her bag and left without saying a word.

Mom closed the door and said, “So this is how she was taking care, is it?”

“Mom..”

“Shut up Tarun, go get dressed first.”, she said feverishly, “Doesn’t she know your plaster is not waterproof? You have to replace it fast now”

“Mom, it was not her fault, I insisted..”

“Clean and dry yourself first, we will talk later”, saying that mom went inside.

Three of us, me, mom and dad were seating across center table.

“Tell me Tarun, what is going on between you and Preeti?”, mom asked me

This is the chance to speak your heart out. I thought to myself.

“Mom, we love each other”, I said

“Love?? What is that college going girl know about Love Tarun?”, mom

“Mom, Preeti is a matured girl”, I said

“Matured? I saw that in afternoon. How can she take you in rain with your plaster on?”, mom

“Mom, I already told you, it was me who insisted on going in rain”

“How can you love a girl who almost caused you to death”, mom

“Mom, don’t go over that again. We all know, it was nobody’s fault. It was just an accident”

“Look Tarun, I don’t want to debate, but you also know it very well that there is no point in *your* relationship. We are against inter-cast marriage. Aren’t we?”, mom looked at dad who was quiet all this time

Dad thought for a moment and said, “Well yes, but I agree with Tarun, Preeti is a sensible girl. If she is ready to accustom to our traditions then what is the problem?”.

Mom was awe-struck

I almost jumped on seat. I thought to hug dad.

“Look, we were worried that our daughter-in-law, if from another cast or from another culture then we both will not be comfortable. But with Preeti, I doubt it will happen. I am already enjoying her company. World is changing, I guess, we should also change.”, dad said

“I don’t care about world. My home is my world, and I don’t think it is changing that fast.”, mom

“Come on mom, what is the problem? Is Preeti not a nice girl? Did she ever hurt you? You held her responsible for the accident, but she kept quiet isn’t it? I have to live my life, and it will be good if I will decide whom to get married. Dad agrees as well. Why are you doing this?” I was close to pleading

“Look, let’s do this thing. You meet her parents. They are nice people. Spend some more time with Preeti as if she is your daughter-in-law and then decide. Don’t hurry up the things”

“That make sense”, dad echoed my opinion.

“Well, if you and your dad agrees, then what is that for me to say? I will meet them, but that doesn’t mean I am agreeing to your marriage. Okay?”

I nodded.

Preeti was overjoyed when she heard the news.

We choose next Sunday for the family union lunch for three reasons. One I didn't want anything else to come in between and this planned thing . Two I wanted the momentum to keep going and third there was a India-Australia match coming up which will keep the Dads involved *together*.

"So you must be supporting Harbhajan singh", my dad asked Preeti's dad. Both were busy looking at the cricket match of India-Australia.

"NO!! He was good, he is good at times, but I think there are other talents in queue who can perform better these days. But why do you think that?", Preeti's dad asked in response.

"He is Punjabi right?", my dad was surprised to hear that Preeti's father is not supporting Harbhajan Singh

"Who cares? It's an Indian team, and I should support India, not the regional players".

I felt I should applaud for that answer.

My dad thought for a moment and nodded.

Inside, my mom was quiet, or should I say her voice was suppressed by Preeti's moms' constant talk. My mom just has to start a topic, and her mom was all over it.

Whereas, we both were busy, covertly gazing at each other, communicating with eye-language.

Preeti was wearing a magenta colored *saree* which was looking beautiful on her fair complexion. Her long untied hair looked bit wet because of some conditioner she used, added the freshness of her beauty.

I winked at her. She smiled and went inside kitchen to offer help.

"How is your leg Tarun?", Preeti's dad asked me over a lunch table.

"It is recovering well", I said.

"So are you on leave these days?", he asked me

"No uncle, I am working from home. We have this VPN connection using which you can do the same work, which you do seating at office desk.", I explained him what the VPN connection is and related terminology.

"Wow that is a great technology! You guys are so lucky to born in this era. I wish we had the same technology and Preeti could have got a brother / sister, considering I can work from Home", his dad said mischievously

Well, it was a poor joke, but for no reason, everybody laughed.

The scene looked like a perfect happy family.

Lunch was over and Preeti served us Desserts from fridge.

“So when are you planning for Preeti’s wedding?”, my mom asked

“NO MOM.. DON’T ASK THAT QUESTION”, I was about to shout. Everything was going so well and then this question will spoil everything. I don’t want Preeti’s parents to say, “We are looking for”, or “Next month we will enroll her name to some PunjabiMatrimony.com” or something like that.

I was looking at them with my deserted spoon hanging in air.

“Whenever you say so”, they replied

“Well, then this is the plan”, mom continued, “.. let’s plan for an engagement of Preeti and Tarun next month and in another three months, *WEDDING*”

I WAS DROP DEAD. From out of the blue these things came and banged on me. I felt like a huge comet stroked on my chest. Neither I could eat the dessert, nor could hold the spoon in hand. Spoon slipped and fell on the dish.

Everybody looked at me, “Why Tarun? Don’t you want to marry our sweet little daughter?”, Preeti’s mom asked me.

I looked at Preeti, we exchanged glances. Her magenta saree color was reflected on her cheeks. She was equally shocked.

“No aunty ji, I mean yes aunti ji”, I said

“Alright then, let’s catch-up again on Wednesday, and decide on dates. Alright?”, my mom asked to which everybody nodded, except me.

I wanted to get married to Preeti right now 😊

“Preeti, can you wait for some more time? I know you and Tarun have lots of questions. Tarun will drop you home”, Mom asked Preeti

“Is it okay with you?”, Mom asked Preeti’s parents.

“Oh Jee, okay ki kya baat hain?, aap hi ki hain who”, preeti’s father said merrily.

I bent down and touched the feet of Preeti’s parents, for the fact that I was chosen to be their son-in-law .

“MOM, What was that?”, I asked her a question once Preeti ‘s parents were out of sight.

Mom smiled and said "You happy?"

"Of course mom I'm happy. But how did you know about it?" I was still surprised.

"Sit down" mom said pointing towards a settee. Mom pulled Preeti close near her seat.

Looks like my father was aware of all the facts and files, so he left to have a walk after a heavy and pleasant lunch.

Mom started the climax.

"Couple of days before you met with an accident, your friend was here."

"My friend? Who?", I was surprised

"Neha, she was here", mom said

I looked back at Preeti, she was listening curiously.

"She wanted to see me. She told me about your relationship with her. She was hurt deeply that you separated from her because she was of some other cast, and now you are in love with Preeti who is not only of other cast, but completely of some other culture.

I noticed that she was still involved in you even after she got married.

I felt sorry for her. I was frustrated with your act Tarun. You were very well aware that our family is against inter-cast marriages. Why do you have to get involved with somebody like this? I don't know about you, but she was involved in you by all means.

That also alerted my mind, with Preeti the same thing could happen. At that point, I was not sure about your involvement in this relationship. What if tomorrow you two gets separated again, with a re-born of new Neha in the form of Preeti.

It is easy for guys to move on, but difficult for girls.

So I decided to talk to you about this and I was all determined to separate both of you.

But just then, this accident happened. I saw Preeti sobbing for you just like a kid and even I heard *you* couple of times calling her name when you were asleep under the influence of steroids. "

I looked at Preeti, she was looking back at me with a puddle of love in her eyes.

"We are your parents Tarun", mom continued, "And no parents in the world need a super-power to understand feelings of their child. You should see your face when you talk about your friends and when you talk about Preeti. You become over-cautious, worried not to spill up your secret.

I thought and re-thought on this for a long long time. I was not able to convince myself.

That day, when I was out with Preeti in the market, I tried my best to hurt her. I deliberately posed some daunting questions about your relation-ship. Preeti told me everything. She still could have lied lot many things, but she was open to me.”

‘I love Tarun from bottom of my heart. I will take every care not to hurt him or his parents’, she said looking into my eyes. ‘I might not be of your cast or culture, but that doesn’t change our feelings to each other. Love knows no language. We were in love without thinking about which culture we came from. Aunty, I am trying to learn Marathi, I will cook food that you eat daily, I will follow the custom that you follow, I will...’

You know Tarun, I cut her off. She don’t have to say all this things, I was able to read the pure love for you in her eyes. I then know she loves you, I then know that she will make you happy. Infact, I was able to see, you already *are* happy with her.”

“That was touching”, I said without saying a word to Preeti

Mumma took Preeti’s hand into her hand and continued..

“Preeti asked me finally, ‘Aunty, can I call you Mumma?’

We hugged each other with warm tears dripping from eyes. A proposal of being a daughter-in-law was quite unique, isn’t it?”

I kept quiet, I was speechless.

“Next day, I talked to your dad. I was not sure how he will react, but he was already in your favor.

It was difficult to stand by to our principals for the sake of Preeti. We felt we should not lose her for such useless principals. We decided to break it.

I was against the inter-cast marriage, so was your dad. Had it been another girl, I am not sure how we would have reacted. But with Preeti, there was no question of such stupid things. She is an angel Tarun, and you should thank god, you are blessed with a ***touch of an angel.***

Same day, we both went to Preeti’s home to talk to her parents. They are such a sweet people. Without saying or asking a single thing, they agreed, just for the sake of their daughter’s happiness.”

Mom cleared her eyes using tip of her saree.

Here we go, the last *vedic mantra* of the evening that was about to begin.

I tried to catch face of Preeti behind the *Anterpat*. But I could see nothing. I beckoned one of my friend in the crowd who was standing in a position from where she can watch Preeti. She looked at Preeti and gestured with her left hand feast rubbing on her eyes, to indicate that my love is all tears on the other side.

“Tadev lagnam...” and it began.

I know it is tough for a girl to leave their parents and join a new family. Tears in girls eyes at this time are well justified. But at the same time, I was sure that those tears were not just because of the grief, but because of the happiness that she was flooded with.

People clapped and we were showered with colored-rice grains thrown at us by so many happy souls with their blessings.

Anterpat was taken away and I saw a Preeti’s face with a cheerful smile, a smile that already had stolen my heart away.

T H E B E G I N N I N G

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The song lyric used in the story is from the album of Boyzone