

CHETAN BHAGAT

**FIVE POINT
SOME ONE**

WHAT NOT TO DO AT IIT



Five Point Someone

What *not* to do at IIT

Chetan Bhagat is the author of two blockbuster novels – *Five Point Someone* (2004) and *One Night @ The Call Center* (2005) – which continue to top bestseller lists. In March 2008, the New York Times called him the ‘biggest-selling English-language novelist in India’s history’. Both his books have inspired major Bollywood films.

Seen more as the voice of a generation than just an author, this IIT/IIM-A graduate is making India read like never before. *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* is his third novel.

After eleven years in Hong Kong, the author relocated to Mumbai in 2008, where he works as an investment banker. Apart from books, the author has a keen interest in screenplays and spirituality. Chetan is married to Anusha, his classmate from IIM-A, and has twin boys – Ishaan and Shyam.

Five Point Someone

What *not* to do at IIT

A Novel

by

CHETAN BHAGAT



RUPA

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For my mother

For IIT, my alma mater

Contents

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Bare Beginnings](#)

[Terminator](#)

[Barefoot on Metal](#)

[Line Drawing](#)

[Make Notes not War](#)

[Five-point Something](#)

[Alok Speaks](#)

[One Year Later](#)

[The Mice Theory](#)

[Cooperate to Dominate](#)

[The Gift](#)

[Neha Speaks](#)

[One More Year Later](#)

[Vodka](#)

[Operation Pendulum](#)

[The Longest Day of My Life I](#)

[The Longest Day of My Life II](#)

[The Longest Day of My Life III](#)

[The Longest Day of My Life IV](#)

[The Longest Day of My Life V](#)

[The Longest Day of My Life VI](#)

[Ryan Speaks](#)

[Kaju-burfi](#)

[Will we Make It?](#)

[A Day of Letters](#)

[Meeting Daddy](#)

[Five Point Someone](#)

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Prologue

I had never been inside an ambulance before. It was kind of creepy. Like a hospital was suddenly asked to pack up and move. Instruments, catheters, drips and a medicine box surrounded two beds. There was hardly any space for me and Ryan to stand even as Alok got to sprawl out. I guess with thirteen fractures you kind of deserve a bed. The sheets were originally white, which was hard to tell now as Alok's blood covered every square inch of them. Alok lay there unrecognizable, his eyeballs rolled up and his tongue collapsed outside his mouth like an old man without dentures. Four front teeth gone, the doctor later told us.

His limbs were motionless, just like his father's right side, the right knee bent in a way that would make you think Alok was boneless. He was still, and if I had to bet my money, I'd have said he was dead.

"If Alok makes it through this, I will write a book about our crazy days. I really will," I swore. It is the kind of absurd promise you make to yourself when you are seriously messed up in the head and you haven't slept for fifty hours straight...

Bare Beginnings

BEFORE I REALLY BEGIN THIS BOOK, LET ME FIRST TELL you what this book is not. It is not a guide on how to live through college. On the contrary, it is probably an example of how screwed up your college years can get if you don't think straight. But then this is my take on it, you're free to agree or disagree. I expect Ryan and Alok, psychos both of them, will probably kill me after this but I don't really care. I mean, if they wanted their version out there, they could have written one themselves. But Alok cannot write for nuts, and Ryan, even though he could really do whatever he wants, is too lazy to put his bum to the chair and type. So stuff it boys – it is my story, I am the one writing it and I get to tell it the way I want it.

Also, let me tell you one more thing this book is certainly not. This book will not help you get into IIT. I think half the trees in the world are felled to make up the IIT entrance exam guides. Most of them are crap, but they might help you more than this one will.

Ryan, Alok and I are probably the last people on earth you want to ask about getting into IIT. All we would say as advice is, if you can lock yourself in a room with books for two years and throw away the key, you can probably make it here. And if your high school days were half as miserable as mine, disappearing behind a pile of books will not seem like such a bad idea. My last two years in school were living hell, and unless you captained the basketball team or played the electric guitar since age six, probably yours were too. But I don't really want to get into all that.

I think I have made my disclaimers, and it is time for me to commence.

Well, I have to start somewhere, and what better than the day I joined the Indian Institute of Technology and met Ryan and Alok for the first time; we had adjacent rooms on the second floor of the Kumaon hostel. As per tradition, seniors rounded us up on the balcony for ragging at midnight. I was still rubbing my eyes as the three of us stood to attention and three seniors faced us. A senior named Anurag leaned against a wall. Another senior, to my nervous eye, looked like a demon from cheap mythological TV shows – six feet tall, over a hundred kilos, dark, hairy, and huge teeth that were ten years late meeting an orthodontist. Although he inspired terror, he spoke little and was busy providing background for the boss, Baku, a lungi-clad human toothpick, and just as smelly is my guess.

“You bloody freshers, dozing away eh? Rascals, who will give an introduction?” he screamed.

“I am Hari Kumar sir, Mechanical Engineering student, All India Rank 326.” I was nothing if not honest under pressure.

“I am Alok Gupta sir, Mechanical Engineering, Rank 453,” Alok said as I looked at him for the first time. He was my height, five feet five inches – in short, very short – and had these thick, chunky glasses on. His portly frame was covered in neatly ironed white kurta-pajamas.

“Ryan Oberoi, Mechanical Engineering, Rank 91, sir,” Ryan said in a deep husky voice and all eyes swung to him.

Ryan Oberoi, I repeated his name again mentally. Now here was a guy you don't see in IIT too often; tall, with spare height, purposefully lean and unfairly handsome. A loose gray T-shirt proclaimed 'GAP' in big blue letters on his chest and shiny black shorts reached his knees. Relatives

abroad for sure, I thought. Nobody wears GAP to bed otherwise.

“You bastards,” Baku was shrieking, “Off with your clothes.”

“Aw Baku, let us talk to them a bit first,” protested Anurag, leaning against the wall, sucking a cigarette butt.

“No talking!” Baku said, one scrawny hand up. “No talking, just remove those damn clothes.”

Another demon grinned at us, slapping his bare stomach every few seconds. There seemed to be no choice so we surrendered every item of our clothing, shivering at the unholy glee in Baku’s face as he walked by each of us, checking us out and grinning.

Nakedness made the difference between our bodies more stark as Alok and me drew figures on the floor with deeply embarrassed toes, trying to be casual about our twisted balloon figures. Ryan’s body was flawless, man, he was a hunk; muscles that cut at the right places and a body frame that for once resembled the human body shown in biology books. You could describe his body as sculpture. Alok and I, on the other hand, weren’t exactly what you’d call art.

Baku told Alok and me to step forward, so the seniors could have better view and a bigger laugh.

“Look at them, mothers fed them until they are ready to explode, little Farex babies,” Baku cackled.

The demon joined him in laughter. Anurag smiled behind a burst of smoke as he extinguished another cigarette, creating his own special effects.

“Sir, please sir, let us go sir,” Alok pleaded to Baku as he came closer.

“What? Let you go? We haven’t even done anything yet to you beauties. C’mon bend down on all fours now, you two fatsos.”

I looked at Alok’s face. His eyes were invisible behind those thick, bulletproof spectacles, but going by his contorted face, I could tell he was as close to tears as I was.

“C’mon, do what he says,” the demon admonished. He and Baku seemed to share a symbiotic relationship; Baku needed him for brute strength, while the servile demon needed him for directions.

Alok and I bent down on all fours. More laughter, this time from above our heads, ensued. The demon suggested racing both of us, his first original opinion in a while but Baku overrode him.

“No racing-vacing, I have a better idea. Just wait, I have to go to my room. And you naked cows, don’t look up.”

Baku raced up the corridor as we waited for twenty tense seconds, gazing at the floor. I glanced sideways and noticed a small water puddle adjacent to Alok’s head, droplets falling from his eye.

Meanwhile, the demon made Ryan flex his muscles and make warrior poses. I am sure he looked photogenic, but didn’t dare look up to verify.

Our ears picked up Baku’s hurried steps as he returned.

“Look what I got,” he said, holding up his hands.

“Baku, what the hell is that for...?” Anurag enquired as we turned our heads up.

In each of his hands, Baku held an empty Coke bottle. “Take a wild guess,” he said as he clanged the bottles together, making suggestive gestures.

Face turning harder, arms still in modelling pose, Ryan spoke abruptly, “Sir, what exactly are you trying to do?”

“What, isn’t it obvious? And who the hell are you to ask me?” choked Baku.

“Sir, stop,” Ryan said, in a louder voice.

“Fuck off,” Baku dismissed, disbelief writ large in his widened eyes at this blatant rebellion against his age-old authority.

As Baku put the bottles in position, Ryan abandoned his pin-up pose and jumped. Catching him unawares, he grabbed the two bottles and stamped hard on Baku’s feet. Baku released his hands and the bottles were with Ryan, James Bond style.

We knew that stomp hurt since Baku’s scream was ultrasonic.

“Get this bastard,” Baku shrieked in agony.

The demon’s IQ was clouded by the events but his ears registered the command for action and he had just collected himself in response when Ryan smashed the two Coke bottles on the balcony parapet. Each bottle now was butt-broken, and he waved the jagged ends in air.

“Come, you bastards,” Ryan swore, his face scarlet like a watermelon slice. Baku and the demon retreated a few paces. Anurag, who had been smouldering in the backdrop, snapped to attention. “Hey, cool it everyone here. How did this happen? What is your name - Ryan, take it easy man. This is just fun.”

“It’s not fun for me,” growled Ryan, “Just get the hell out of here.”

Alok and I looked at each other. I was hoping Ryan knew what he was doing. I mean sure, he was saving our ass from a Coke bottle, but broken Coke bottles could be a lot worse.

“Listen yaar,” Anurag started as Ryan cut him short.

“Just get lost,” Ryan shouted so hard that Baku seemed to blow away just from the impact. Actually, he was shuffling backward slowly and steadily till he was almost flying in his haste to get away, the demon following suit. Anurag stood there gaping at Ryan for a while and then looked at us.

“Tell him to control himself. Or one day he will take you guys down too,” Anurag said.

Alok and I got up and wore our clothes.

“Thanks Ryan, I was really scared,” Alok said, as he removed his spectacles to wipe snot and tears, face to face with his hero at last.

There is a reason why they say men should not cry, they just look so, like, ugly. Alok’s spectacles were sad enough, but his baby-wet blubbery eyes were enough to depress you into suicide.

“Yes, thanks Ryan, some risk you took there. That Baku guy is sick. Though you think they would have done anything?” I said, striving for a cool I did not feel.

“Who knows? Maybe not,” Ryan rotated a shoulder, “But you can never tell when guys get into mob mentality. Trust me, I have lived in enough boarding schools.”

Ryan’s heroics were enough to make us all bond faster than Fevicol. Besides, we were hostelite neighbours and in the same engineering department. They say you should not get into a relationship with people you sleep with on the first date. Well, though we hadn’t slept together, we had seen each other naked at primary meet, so perhaps we should have refrained from striking up a friendship. But our troika was kind of inevitable.

“M-A-C-H-I-N-E,” the blackboard proclaimed in big bold letters.

As we entered the amphitheatre-shaped lecture room, we grabbed a pile of handouts each. The instructor sat next to the blackboard like a bloated beetle, watching us settle down, waiting for the huddled murmurs to cease.

He appeared around forty years of age, with gray hair incandescent from three tablespoons of coconut oil, wore an un-tucked light blue shirt and had positioned three pens in his front pocket, along with chinks, like an array of bullets.

“Welcome everyone. I am Professor Dubey, Mechanical Engineering department...so, first day in college. Do you feel special?” he said in a monotone.

The class remained silent. We were busy scanning our handouts and feeling like a herd.

The course was Manufacturing Processes, often shortened to ManPro for easier pronunciation. The handouts consisted of the course outline. Contents covered the basic techniques of manufacturing – such as welding, machining, casting, bending and shaping. Along with the outline, the handout contained the grading pattern of the course.

Majors – 40%

Minors – 20%

Practicals – 20%

Assignments (6-8) and Surprise Quizzes (3-4) – 20%

Prof Dubey noticed the limp response to his greeting and made his voice more exuberant. “Look at the handout later. Don’t worry, you will get enough of these, one for every course. Put them aside now,” he said as he stood up and walked toward the blackboard.

He took out a chalk from his pocket with a flourish celluloid-terrorists reserved for hand-grenades and underlined the word ‘machine’ approximately six times. Then he turned to us. “Machine, the basic reason for existence of any mechanical engineer. Everything you learn finds application in machines. Now, can anyone tell me what a machine is?”

The class fell even more silent. That’s the first lesson: various degrees of silence.

“Anyone?” the professor asked again as he started walking through the rows of students. As the students on the aisles felt even more stalked and avoided eye contact, I turned around to study my new classmates. There must have been seventy of us in this class, three hundred of us in a batch. I noticed a boy in front of me staring at the instructor intently, his head moving to and fro, mouth ajar; a timid sort, whom Baku could polish off for snack any given day.

“You,” Prof Dubey chose me as his first casualty.

It was the first time the condition struck me, where tongue cleaves unto dental roof, body freezes, blood vessels rupture and sweat bursts out in buckets.

“You, I am talking to you,” the professor clarified.

“Hari, Hari..” somebody inside me called but could only get my answering machine. I could have attempted an answer, or at least a silly ‘I don’t know’ but it was as if my mouth was AWOL.

“Strange,” surmised Prof Dubey dubiously as he moved to another student.

“You in the check shirt. What do you think?”

Check Shirt had hitherto been pretending to take notes to escape the professor’s glance. “Sir, Machine sir...is a device...like big parts...sir like big gears and all...”

“What?” Prof Dubey’s disgust fell like spit on Check Shirt. “See, the standard just keeps falling every year. Our admission criteria are just not strict enough.” He shook his oiled skull, the one that contained all the information in this planet, including the definition of machines.

“Yeah, right. Busted my butt for two years for this damn place. One in hundred is not good enough for them,” Ryan whispered to me.

“Shshh,” ordered Prof Dubey, looking at the three of us, “anyway, the definition of a machine is simple. It is anything that reduces human effort. Anything. So, see the world around you and it is full of machines.”

Anything that reduces human effort, I repeated in my head. Well, that sounded simple enough.

“So, from huge steel mills, to simple brooms, man has invented so much to reduce human effort,” the professor continued, as he noticed the class was mesmerized by his simple clarification.

“Airplane?” said one student in the front row.

“Machine,” instructor said.

“Stapler,” suggested another.

“Machine.”

It really was amazing. A spoon, car, blender, knife, chair – students threw examples at the professor and there was only one answer – machine.

“Fall in love with the world around you,” Prof Dubey smiled for the first time, “for you will become the masters of machines.”

A feeling of collective joy darted through the class for having managed to convert Prof Dubey's sour expression into smiles.

"Sir, what about a gym machine, like a bench press or something?" Ryan interrupted the bonhomie.

"What about it?" Prof Dubey stopped beaming.

"That doesn't reduce human effort. In fact, it increases it."

The class fell silent again.

"Well, I mean..." Prof Dubey said as he scouted for arguments.

Boy, did Ryan really have a point?

"Perhaps it is too simple a definition then?" Ryan said in a pseudo-helpful voice.

"What are you trying to do?" the professor asked tight-lipped as he came close to us again, "Are you saying that I am wrong?"

"No sir, I'm just..."

"Watch it son. In my class, just watch it," was all Prof Dubey said as he moved to the front.

"Okay, enough fun. Now, let us focus on ManPro," he said as he rubbed off the word 'machine' from the blackboard and the six underlines below it, "my course is very important. I am sure many professors will tell you about their courses. But I care about ManPro. So, don't miss class, finish your assignments and be prepared, a surprise quiz can drop from the sky at any time."

He went on to tackle casting, one of the oldest methods of working with metal. After an hour on how iron melts and foundry workers pour it into sand moulds, he ended the session.

"That is it for today. Best of luck once again for your stay here. Remember, as your head of department Prof Cherian says, the tough workload is by design, to keep you on your toes. And respect the grading system. You get bad grades, and I assure you – you get no job, no school and no future. If you do well, the world is your oyster. So, don't slip, not even once, or there will be no oyster, just slush."

A shiver ran through all of us as with that quote the professor slammed the duster on the desk and walked away in a cloud of chalk.

Terminator

THEY SAY TIME FLIES WHEN YOU ARE HAVING FUN. IN THE first semester alone, with six courses, four of them with practical classes, time dragged so slow and comatose, fun was conspicuous by its absence. Every day, from eight to five, we were locked in the eight-storey insti-building with lectures, tutorials and labs. The next few hours of the evening were spent in the library or in our rooms as we prepared reports and finished assignments. And this did not even include the tests! Each subject had two minor tests, one major and three surprise quizzes; seven tests for six courses meant forty-two tests per semester, mathematically speaking. Luckily, the professors spared us surprise quizzes in the first month, citing ragging season and the settling-in period of course; but the ragging season ended soon and it meant a quiz could happen any time. In every class we had to look out for instructor's subtle hints about a possible quiz in the next class.

Meanwhile, I got better acquainted with Ryan and Alok. Ryan's dad had this handicraft business that was essentially a sweatshop for potters that made vases for the European market. Ryan's father and mother were both intimately involved in the business and their regular travel meant Ryan stayed in boarding school, a plush colonial one in hill-town Mussoorie.

Alok's family, I guess, was of limited means, which is just a polite way of saying he was poor. His mother was the only earning member, and last I heard, schoolteachers didn't exactly hit dirt on payday. Besides, half her salary regularly went to support her husband's medical treatment. At the same time, Alok's elder sister was getting near what he mournfully called 'marriageable age', another cause of major worry for his household. Going by Alok's looks I guess she wasn't breathtakingly beautiful either.

I also got familiar with Kumaon and other wing-mates. I won't go into all of them, but in one corner there was Sukhwinder or the 'Happy Surd' since his face broke into sunny smiles at proximity with anything remotely human. Next to him was the studious Venkat, who coated his windows with thick black paper and stayed locked inside alone. There was 'Itchy' Rajesh whose hands were always scratching some part of his body, sometimes in objectionable places. On the other side of the hallway were seniors' rooms, including Baku, Anurag and other animals.

Ryan, Alok and I often studied together in the evenings. One month into the first semester, we were sitting in my room chasing a quanto-physics assignment deadline.

"Damn," Ryan said as he got up his easy chair to stretch his spectacular spine. "What a crazy week; classes, assignments, more classes, assignments and not to mention the coming-attraction quizzes. You call this a life?"

Alok sat on the study desk, focused on the physics assignment, head bent down and sideways, just two inches above his sheet. He always writes this way, head near the sheet, pen pressed tight between his fingers, his white worksheets reflected on his thick glasses.

"Wha..." Alok looked up, sounding retarded.

"I said you call this a life?" Ryan asked, this time looking at me.

I was sitting on the bed cross-legged, attempting the assignment on a drawing board. I needed a break, so I put my pen down.

"Call it what you want," I said, words stifled by a Titanic yawn, "but that is not going to change it."

"I think this is jail. It really is. Damn jail," Ryan said, hitting the peeling wall with a fist.

“Maybe you’re forgetting that you’re in IIT, the best college in the country,” Alok said, cracking knuckles.

“So? You put students in jail?” Ryan asked, hands on hips.

“No. But you expect a certain standard,” Alok said, putting his hand up to indicate height.

“This is high standard? Working away like moronic drones until midnight. ManPro yesterday, ApMech day before, Quanto today...it never ends,” Ryan grumbled. “I need a break, man. Anyone for a movie?”

“And what about the assignment?” Alok blinked.

“Priya has *Terminator* on,” Ryan beguiled.

“Then when will we sleep?” Alok said.

“You are one real muggu eh?” Ryan said indulgently to him.

“I’ll go,” I said, keeping my drawing board aside, “come Alok, we’ll do it later.”

“It will get late, man,” Alok warned half-heartedly.

I stood up and took his pen, put it into his geometry box. Yes, Alok had a geometry box, like he was about twelve years old.

“Come get up,” I said when I noticed two paintbrushes in his box. “Hey, what are the paintbrushes for?”

“Nothing,” Alok mumbled.

I lifted the brushes, painting imaginary arcs in air. “Then why do you have them? To give colour to your circuit diagrams?” I laughed at my own joke, waving the brushes in the air. “Or to express your soul in the ManPro class? To draw Prof Dubey’s frowny face?”

“No. Actually, they are my father’s. He was an artist, but he’s paralyzed now.”

There are times in life you wish dinosaurs weren’t extinct and could be whistled to come and gulp you down. I went motionless, fingers in mid-air.

Ryan saw my face and pressed his teeth together to be simultaneously tch-tch sympathetic to Alok and stop laughing at me. “Really Alok? That’s really sad. I’m sorry man,” he said, putting his hand around Alok’s shoulder. The bastard, scoring over me for no fault of mine.

“It’s okay. It was a long while ago. We are used to him like that now,” Alok said, finally getting up for the movie while I was still hoping I’d evaporate.

When we walked out, Ryan was with Alok, me trailing six steps behind.

“Well, I have lived in boarding school all my life, so I can’t really understand. But it must be pretty difficult for you. I mean how did you manage?” Ryan continued.

“Barely managed actually. My mother is a biology teacher. That was the only income. Elder sister is still in college.”

I nodded my head, trying desperately to evince how empathetic to his cause I was, too.

“How do you think I got into IIT? I was taking care of him for the past two years,” Alok said.

“Really?” I said, finally getting my chance to get into the conversation.

“Yes, every day after school I was nursing him and reading my books.”

Ryan had a scooter, which made it easy for us to get to Priya. It was illegal for three people to ride together in a triple sandwich, but cops rarely demanded more than twenty bucks if they stopped you. Chances of getting caught were less than one in ten, so Ryan said it was still cheap on a probability weighted basis.

Priya cinema at night was a completely different world from our quiet campus. Families, couples and groups of young people lined up to catch the hit movie of the season. We bought front row tickets, as Alok did not want to spend too much. Personally, I think he was just too blind to sit far away. In any case, the movie was science fiction, which I should have guessed given Ryan’s choice; he always picked sci-fi movies. I hate sci-fi movies, but who asks me? This one had time travel, human robots,

laser guns, the works, presented in an unfunny way. In ten minutes, the obscenely muscular hero's heroics looked too silly to even smirk at, and I was yawning uncontrollably.

"Wow!" Ryan said, bringing his hand to his face as the villain launched a torpedo from his backpack.

"What the hell do you see in these movies?" I whispered, just to jack his trip.

"Man, look at all those gadgets."

"But they're all fake. It is fiction."

"Yes, but we could have them one day."

"Time travel? You really think we could have time travel?" Ryan's ridiculous when he gets excited.

"Hush, it's hard enough to understand the accent guys," Alok objected.

When we returned to Kumaon at midnight, our asses were set on fire, I mean not literally, but everyone from Venkat to Sukhwinder were running around with notepads and textbooks.

"Surprise quiz. Strong rumour of one in ApMech," Happy Surd explained as he furiously riffled through his notes, for once not electrified at our company.

ApMech was Applied Mechanics, and apparently, some student in Nilgiri hostel had visited the professor's office in the evening to submit a late assignment. The professor had sinisterly advised to "keep revising your notes", waggling left eyebrow at the same time. Enough to ring the alarm as news travelled through the campus like wildfire.

"Damn. Now we have to study for ApMech. It will take hours," Alok said morosely.

"And we have the Quanto assignment to finish as well," I reminded.

Everyone gathered in my room to study. It was at two in the morning that Alok spoke. "This whole movie thing was a dumb idea, I told you."

"How was I to know? Anyway, why are you taking arbit tension?" Ryan took offence.

"It is not arbit. It's relative grading here, so if we don't study and others do, we are screwed," Alok said, stressing the last word so hard even Ryan was startled.

Just then, a mouse darted out from under my bed.

"Did you see that?" Ryan said, eager to change the topic. He removed his slippers, hoping to take aim and strike the rodent down. However, the rodent had other ideas on his own demise and dived diplomatically back under the bed.

"Yes, there are these creepy mice in my room. Little bastards," I said, almost affectionately.

"You want me to kill them for you?" Ryan offered.

"It's not that easy. They are too smart and quick," I said.

"Challenge?" Ryan said.

"I beg you brothel-borns, not now. Can we please study?" Alok said, literally folding his hands. The guy is too dramatic.

Ryan eased back into the chair and wore his footwear. He opened the ApMech book and exhaled deep through his mouth.

"Yes sir, let us mug and cram. Otherwise, how will we become great engineers of this great country," Ryan mock-sighed.

"Shut up," Alok said, his face already immersed in his workbook.

Ryan did shut up after that, even though he kept bending to look under the bed from time to time. I was sure he wanted to get at least one mouse, but the little creatures smartly maintained a low profile. We finished our Quanto assignment in an hour and then revised the ApMech notes until five, by which time Ryan was snoring soundly, I was struggling to stay awake and even Alok's eyes had started watering. We still had around a third of the course left, but it was necessary to catch some sleep. Besides, the quiz was only a rumour, we did not know if it would actually materialize.

But rumours, especially ugly ones, have a way of coming true. Thirty minutes into the ApMech

class, Prof Sen locked the door and opened his black briefcase. "Time for some fun. Here is a quickie quiz of multiple choice questions," he said.

Prof Sen passed the handouts to the front row students, who in turn cascaded them backward. Everyone in class knew about the rumour, and the quiz was as much a surprise as snow in Siberia. I took the question sheet and glanced over the questions. Most of them were from recent lectures, the part of the course we could not revise.

"Crap. We never got to the lectures for question five onward," I whispered to Alok.

"We are screwed. Let's get screwed in silence at least," he said as he placed his head in his 'study' position, left cheek almost touching the answer sheet.

We never discussed the quiz upon our return to Kumaon that day. Other students were talking animatedly about some questions being out of course. Obviously, we never finished the course, so we did not know better. We did not have to wait for results too long either. Prof Sen distributed the answer sheets in class two days later.

"Five? I got a five out of twenty," I said to Alok, who sat next to me in class.

"I got seven. Damn it, seven," Alok said.

"I have three. How about that? One, two, three," Ryan said, counting on his fingers.

Prof Sen wrote the customary summary scores on the blackboard.

Average: 11/20

High: 17/20

Low: 3/20

He kept those written for a few minutes, before proceeding with his lecture on cantilever beams.

"I have the lowest. Did you see that?" Ryan whispered to me, unmoved by cantilever beams. It was hard to figure out what he was feeling at this point. Even though he was trying to stay calm and expressionless, I could tell he was having trouble digesting his result. He re-read his quiz, it did not change the score.

Alok was in a different orbit. His face looked like it had on ragging day. He viewed the answer sheet like he had the coke bottle, an expression of anxiety mixed with sadness. It's in these moments that Alok is most vulnerable, you nudge him just a little bit and you know he'd cry. But for now, the quiz results were a repulsive enough sight.

I saw my own answer sheet. The instructor had written my score in big but careless letters, like graffiti written with contempt. Now I am no Einstein or anything, but this never happened to me in school. My score was five on twenty, or twenty-five per cent; I had never in my life scored less than three times as much. Ouch, the first quiz in IIT hurt.

But take Ryan's scores. I wondered if it had been worth it for him to even study last night. I was two points ahead of him, or wait a minute, sixty-six per cent ahead of him, that made me feel better. Thank god for relative misery!

Alok had the highest percentage amongst the three of us, but I could tell he did not find solace in our misery. He saw his score, and he saw the average on the board. I saw his face, twisting every time he saw his wrong answers.

We kept our answer sheets, the proof of our underperformance, in our bags and strolled back to Kumaon. We met at dinner in the mess. The food was insipid as usual, and Alok wrinkled his pug nose as he dispiritedly plopped a thick blob of green substance mess-workers called bhindi masala into his plate. He slammed two rotis on his stainless steel plate and ignored the rest of the semi-solid substances like dal, raita and pulao. Ryan and I took everything; though everything tasted the same, we could at least have some variety of colors on our plate.

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