

Anything for you ma'am

An IITian's Love Story

---- TUSHAR RAHEJA

OCTOBER, THIS YEAR

Now, when driven by emotions, I get down to prepare an account of my extraordinary voyage, I cannot help but wonder what Professor Sidhu, Rajit and Dr. Prabhakar, those fateful men who were meant to be a part of it, were doing at that hour. That hour, my choice for opening this account, was when I truly sprung into action. I recall distinctly: it was a typical October noon; there was a cool breeze all over the place, and the sun was mellow. It does not get any better in Delhi, the city of extremes.

I lay on my back, my mind not without trouble, when the October air, the type that lulls you into sleep, without you actually making any effort, did the trick. My eyes closed, my thoughts scattered, when, suddenly, my cell phone buzzed. It was Khosla, our Class Representative, one who does all the running for a particular department; in my case, the Industrial and Production Department, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi.

"Hullo!!" I said yawning.

"Were you sleeping, Tejas? Get up, *yaar*, I couldn't get you ticket; there was this long queue and little time. Do what you want to quickly. I guess only about fifty tickets left." That woke me up.

"Only fifty?"

"Yes."

"Anyways, thanks, *yaar*, I'll book mine. What are your seat numbers?"

"Bogey S-9; the first twenty-seven are ours."

I got up quickly. I had to rush to the nearest travel agent at once. Bookings opened ten days back and the moron could find time only now to book the tickets. What if I didn't get mine? I grabbed the essentials money and my itinerary that I had so

meticulously prepared on Microsoft Word. I kick-started my Scooty; it coughed, jerked and finally started. I headed for the Sector-15 Market of Faridabad, a peaceful place juxtaposed with Delhi where I live with my papa, mummy, *dadima* (grandma), *babaji* (grandpa) and Sneha – my dearest sister.

It was a spacious office. A huge multi-coloured banner announced 'JFK Travels – Always on the move'. A baffling name, indeed. I recalled coming across a certain JFK Tailors once and wondered what the properties of the ingenious brain behind this JFK chain could be when the man inside the office called me. He looked like a typical businessman.

"How may I help you, sir?"

"Train reservations?" I asked in return. He didn't bother to say yes. He simply pointed towards the board the said 'Rail Reservations' at number three. Rest were air travel related. I was not that rich. I took my seat. Without wasting any more time I asked, "Can you book me tickets from anyplace to anyplace?"

"Certainly, Sir!"

"I mean, for example, sitting here in Faridabad, can you book me tickets from Timbuktu to Honolulu?"

"If there is such a train, then, yes sir!"

"Fine!" I took out my itinerary and showed him the train numbers and names and time. "I want a ticket from Delhi to Pune for 10th December. The train reaches Pune on the 11th. Then I want a ticket for the train from Pune to Chennai, 11th midnight or 12th whatever you wish to call it, which reaches Chennai on 12th night, 8'o clock."

He eyed me suspiciously, I thought, and said: "Only one, sir? For you?"

I replied in positive, coolly and asked. "Are they available?"

A torrent of computer keys late, he said, "Plenty!"

"I was informed that only about fifty remained!" I said.

"No sir, about a hundred and fifty!" he said, smiling and I cursed Khosla. I hate being woken up, especially woken up like that, with a shocker.

"Sir, name?" he asked.

I had thought about that. I wouldn't give my real name.

*"Leave not a speck
That may cause a wreck."*

has always been my slogan. My name wouldn't have mattered but my surname might have. What if he turned to be my father's patient? My father is a doctor, by the way, and so is my mother. And one can never afford complacency when one's parents are doctors. All sorts of people flock to them and while showing a sore eye or a loony pimple, they can always blurt out things that they should not. My father, over the years, has formed a tremendous network of his patients, without any spying intentions, of course. And its wretched members seem to be everywhere. Or at least their sons and daughters are; who, being my schoolmates, contrive to expose, without fail, that latest zero I scored in my Moral Science or some such paper. Thank God, I am in a college now, far away from the network which mercifully has its limitations. So, playing safe, I said what I had thought:

"Rohit Verma." Not a bad name, I reflected, common, any easy to remember. But just as I began to feel good about my enterprising skills, foresight and all that, he bowled the next googly.

"Address?"

I hadn't thought of that. I took a pause.

"Do I have to give it?" I shouldn't have said that.

"Yes"

I tried to correct my expression.

"Actually, I.....I.....I don't live here. I came to visit a friend for Dussehra holidays. I stay in Delhi. Can I give that address?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Fine! D-24, Karakoram House, IIT Delhi."

"Contact number?" I coolly gave my mobile number. Thank God. I have one.

"Well, I want the aisle seats. And, from Delhi to Pune, I prefer a seat in Bogey S-9, if the seat number s beyond 50. Otherwise, book me in bogey S-8 or S-10. I hope you get it?"

"Sir, I have been in his business for then years," he said with pride and would have vomited matter sufficient for his biographer had I not tactfully shouted,

"Wonderful," and pressed hid hand. Yet I repeated all my instructions. I wanted to make sure that they were followed. I wanted *those very* seat numbers. I'll explain all that and other plan details, but, for now, we'll be patient. Here, it would suffice to say that I didn't want to be very close to my college group as one of its constituents was a professor, who one must avoid. Yet I

wanted to be near enough to two of my friends who knew it all. My department was going on an Industrial Tour to Pune. The agent informed me that I'd get the tickets the day after. As I got up, satisfied, I remembered in time to ask him:

"What does JFK stand for?"

"Oh. They are the initials of my grandfather's name!"

"What!" I uttered incredulously. The world was strange. How the great man's grandson could be employed in a travel agency across the seven seas was beyond me. But as I began to feel good about finally establishing an acquaintance of importance, he elaborated with pride: "Yes, sir, Jahangir Fath Khan. He was a great man. Always on the move. Hence this travel agency, dedicated to him, and our slogan too: Always on the move!" Funny was the world, I reflected.

"Do you know another great man shared his initials with your grandfather?" I asked.

"No, sir, I have no knowledge! Who, sir, may he be?"

"Oh, doesn't matter, he was a small man compared to your grandfather," I said, smiling. He smiled too and I moved out.

The cool wind greeted me, stirring in me splendid emotions, I had the gait of a soldier who is finally on his way to meet his lover after a ten-year war. And it is a different matter that mine was a somewhat similar case. I had a song on my lips which is usually the case. There is a song for every occasion, glad or sad. I cannot recall the song but one may bet on it being a merry one. The first stage of the plan had been executed and well. I hardly contain my excitement. I had to tell her and tell then. The moment should not pass. I dialed her number.

"Congratulations Shreya! I am on my way..."



SEPTEMBER, THIS YEAR

It would be convenient here, to rewind our tape a little. To a month back approximately. Mid-September that is. Shreya's number hadn't been reachable for over three hours now. We hadn't spoken since morning. Our life had been punctuated with jinxes lately and these were not good signs. My heart beat faster

each time the call didn't connect. Finally the bell rang. I thanked God!

"Hullo!" I said.

"Hullo!" said she.

"Where have you been the whole day? I have been trying your number since morning. How many times have I told you to inform me that you are busy and can't talk?" I said in a tense voice mixed with anger.

"The network was down. And I couldn't call from home."

"Why?" I fired.

"Mom and dad were around."

"The whole day? You couldn't even find a minute to call me?" I should have tried to understand her position but my temper took over, "How foolish is that! You know very well that I'll be worried. Every time you don't call, I think, not again, not another shocker! But no, you won't call. You are never bothered!"

"Right. I am never bothered," she said irritably.

"Shut up!"

"No, you are right, I am never bothered and why should I be!"

"Now, don't begin. Tell me, all well?"

"How does it matter if it is or not. I am not bothered. And you shouldn't be, either."

"Shreya, please tell me. All well?" I asked a little worried.

"I can't, right now, I'll call you at night. Around eleven-thirty," she said in a melancholic tone. Something was wrong.

"Just tell me if everything is fine!"

"I won't be able to, now. Please."

"I can't hang up like that, Shreya. You make me nervous. At least give me a hint," I summoned all my guts to say, "I hope you are coming to Delhi in December."

"No," she said after a pause, her voice on the verge of breaking. I couldn't talk any more. I needed some time to absorb that shock. I knew that it was on the cards, still I needed time.



MY MIND SPRANG INTO THE PAST...

It was July end and she was back in Chennai – that is where she lives, a good two thousand kilometers away from me. Back, I

mean, from Delhi. We had met quite often while she was here and those surely had been magical days. And after she left I had missed her sorely. So I decided, or say erred, like many other victims of love have since time immemorial and will continue to in spite of my well-meant warnings, to write a letter to her, pouring out my feelings. My first love letter! I wrote under her friend's name and she got in alright.

But not many days late she called to tell me that the letter had been discovered. By her parents, of course. Like a fish out of water, my game up, I asked, like everyone does in such situations, an inconsequential question:

"Didn't you lock the drawer?" I had asked.

"I had!"

"Then? You said there were two keys, both in your possession!"

It so happened, she told me, that a third key existed. Her mother kept it. She wasn't aware of it too until she came into her room after college and found the drawer open and the letter removed. And they say – ignorance is bliss!

Well, rest of it is usual! Her mom played a passing-the-parcel, and gave the letter to her dad and any dad, on discovering a letter written by a lover to his daughter addressing her dangerous things like darling and sweetheart, leaps in the air and so did Mr. Bhargava, her father, and in that process hit the ceiling impairing his brain forever. I don't blame him. It is perhaps natural, for I have seen documentaries that study a dad's reaction on the discovery of his daughter's darling and they all show the same thing. The *dad* goes *mad*. For him it is not merely a letter, but a time bomb, ticking away, threatening to blow his daughter away one day. And when a dada goes mad, he decided that his daughter must be kept in strictest of custodies, with barbed wires and all.

Tough times ensued and I reluctantly admit to have become something of a philosopher. Such was my condition that I managed to write a song on life, playing which on my guitar, brought me comfort. Though scarcely better than a crow's serenade, it was of help, and so I reproduce it for you:

*You haven't pain your rent,
Landlord isn't much of a friend,*

*He wants his 50 dollars 30 cents,
Or you'll be booked for offence,
You'll be kicked out, but
Find new house, new town.
For life goes on.*

*Her name is Alice,
Yesterday you got your first kiss,
Today she tells it is all over,
She saw you with another miss.
Before you tell her it was only your sis,
It's a bye-bye-Alice.
Alices will go but Sallies will come,
Don't worry; life goes on.*

*You've finally found a new job,
Good pay, not much work on the shop,
Your packet's picked on the morning train,
"Oh my God," you're late again.
The boss doesn't listen, says you are outta job
You are a rolling stone again.
Don't worry they say "It can't worse."
And life rolls on.*

*Got no girls to call your own,
No job, no money, no home,
You've been searching for a bench to sleep on.
Everything's so bleak 'n forlorn.
Life's a rollercoaster, with its ups and downs,
Life goes on.*

*There's one thong you've got to learn,
Life's full of twists 'n turns,
You've got to break the rocks in the hot sun,
For the tide to turn.
If there is night, there has to be dawn.
Life goes on.*

*Yesterday may have been shit,
Today you may be a complete misfit,
But tomorrow's a new day,
So don't give up that weeny ray.
You've got to pray, dream, hope and move on,
O-O-O Life goes on.*

The band's gone, the applause over, let us return to the story. Around two months had passed and like all matters, however hot initially, this one too cooled down, and life had indeed gone on. We (which strictly includes only Shreya and me) had hopes that her dad would allow her to come to Delhi in December as had been the plan. We managed to talk once a day and were satisfied. There had been no shock for a long time, until this day when her father had, no doubt, for some reason, ordered that his daughter must not be allowed to go to Delhi. And so, it was required that his daughter's love must go to Chennai, of course. So, that's the story of my first love letter and, well, the last.



BACK TO OCTOBER THIS YEAR

Well, now if you are not as dim as the hundred watt bulb that struggles to light up my room for want of sufficient voltage, you must have gathered the reason behind my voyage.

My decision was spontaneous. I had to go *there* as she was not coming *here*, because we had to meet. It was that simple. Those who have never been smitten by the love bug may find it a little difficult to comprehend the obviousness, but if they only lie coolly on a sofa and think about all the movies they have seen, and all the crazy things in them that lovers often do, the fog would begin to clear up.

After all, I am not building a palace in my lover's name, and cutting the hands of the artists thereafter or, for that matter, not even writing letters in blood, my own of course. I am merely undertaking an expedition, harmless but risky all the same. When you have not met for about six months the one who, as the sayings go, makes your heart beat faster and steals your sleep and peace, it becomes impossible to go on and you think you'd rather die than suffer this agony. It is wise, therefore, to try and do anything that makes the union possible. Hence this journey.

The intellectuals will be quick tosspot that though it is all very merry to say "I'll go", the real thing lies in the doing.

Although fare from being an intellectual. I am glad to tell you that this fact struck me too, and like a hammer. When circumstances are as they were with me, you do say a lot of things to yourself in an enhanced state of mind and become aware of this boring world of really only a bit later. Suddenly, you battle with such concepts as feasibility and practically and -- zoom -- you come crashing to the ground!

And so I was hit, indeed.

But then I must tell you that, although bereft of intellect, give my mind a task which cannot be done the straight way, and it starts to do better.



After talking to her, I finally got my act together and decided firmly that I had to go to Chennai. I thought about all possible ways to go to Chennai in my winter vacations and short-listed some. I decided to call her. Poor thing, she must have been crying. I wanted to tell her that I would come and we'd meet.

"Hullo!"

"Hi!" I said, trying to gather as much happiness I could.

"What happened?" she said with her innate sweetness.

"Nothing, just wanted to apologize for hanging up like that. I am sorry. Nut I couldn't talk then."

"It is okay. I understand."

"Now, at least tell me what happened, why are you not coming?"

"I told you I'll call you around eleven-thirty, Tejas."

"Tell me something at least. Your dad said something about us?"

"Yes!"

"What?"

"Do I have to tell now?"

"A little."

"Okay, Raju *bhaiya* is getting married..."

"Raju *bhaiya*..." I tried to place him among her numerous cousins,

"The one who used to carry you piggyback all day long?" I asked and she chuckled.

"Yes, the same..."

"Where is he these days?"

"Pune."

"Where is the marriage? Pune?"

"No, here in Chennai. The dates and all are being decided. When mummy came to know about it, she asked papa if was could visit

Delhi in November as we'll be struck her in December." She paused.

"Then? Go on and please don't cry!"
"Papa told her that she could go if she wanted to but that he won't allow me. He said he was sure I'd lie again and meet you!" she managed to say that.

"Don't worry, I'll come."

"You? How can you come? She asked, stunned.

"I'll explain all that when we talk at night. Bye, love you and don't you cry."



She called at eleven-forty. Late as usual. But I don't mind that. In fact, I sort of like these habits that accompany a typical cute girl. Coming late. Taking hours to dress up, irritating you and getting irritated at small-small things. Yes, sometimes when mood is not receptive, these things do get on to you, but mostly you smile inwardly and marvel at the uniqueness and beauty of a girl. Charms unlimited!

It is so lovely to talk into the night with her. We lose all sense of time and surroundings, and become completely lost in each other when, suddenly one of us glances at the watch – it's been rather long, it's been two hour's! A trifle if you take into account the other long twenty two hours of the day, but absurdly long when you realize it is an STD call. It is so difficult to hang up. We have so much to talk about and it seems we have just begun, when the demand watch proves us wrong. How lovely things pass so quickly and boring things seem eternal, will always remain a puzzle.

So she told me as promised, in detail, about why she was not coming. There was her cousin's marriage and that, too, in Chennai. These coincidences kill you. You wonder if it is a game going on. How, of all the zillion places, can her brother choose a girl in Chennai? And just as we were discussing our eventful life, getting sentimental, I told her again, that it is fine, if that's the game, then we have to play it. I'd come to Chennai. She replied lovingly and crying, "But how will you come?"

"Don't worry, I have many options. I told you about my Industrial tour in December. I can fake it at home and come to Chennai.

Then we also have our Inter-IIT meet scheduled at IIT Madras this year. I can try my luck there. Or I can apply for training in some company in Chennai. Or maybe, I can come with my friends. You see, ma'am, for your genius lover there are options unlimited. No worries."

"Please don't lie at your home. If you are caught, there'll be more problems. Right now, only my parents know. What if your parents come to know as well?"

"See, that's a risk that we'll have to take. And, God willing, it'll all be fine."

"But, better if you don't have to lie. I don't see how you can come!" She said, worried.

The mere thought of going to Chennai and meeting her had dispelled every bit of droopiness in me. I was already looking forward to my adventure. My tone was now brimming with exuberance and *filmi* spirit. I told her as Mr. Shah Rukh Khan, himself, would tell his heroine: "Shreya, you want to meet me or not?"

"Of course, I do. But how will you come? It is so risky. What if something happens?"

I repeated, "You want to meet me or not? Say yes or no and nothing else."

"Yes."

"Then, stop crying and stop worrying. I will come, darling. And besides, what is life if it is normal and boring? It must have some adventure, otherwise all thrill and enjoyment will be lost," I said philosophically, "And you know how much I love movies and things that happen in them, so it'll be fun. And, if we pull this through, won't we have nice things to tell our grandchildren?"

"Yes..." she said in a low voice.

"So, when God is giving us such a good chance to live a movie, why should we despair?"

"But, how much more *filmi* can it get?"

"Don't know that, I hope it is normal sometimes too, but yes, right now it is a perfect script for a *masala* movie."

"You'll come this far, Tejas, just for me?"

Anything for you, ma'am, anything!"

And we went on talking into the night. About cute things, silly things, telling each other the love that we had for each other and how much we missed each other, over a million times. And never once did it sound stale; each time we felt the same joy hearing it, our souls so lost in each other's. tough times, however

unwelcome they might be, how much we may curse them, do one god for sure; they bring us closer. They remind us all how much we need each other and that we are incomplete without each other. They test our love and it is so beautiful to sail together, hand in hand, enduring storms, and in this effort if we may perish too, our love will live on forever.



Said Rishabh: "It is best that you apply for a month long training in some Chennai firm. They excuse you for the Industrial Tour, then. No suspicious."

The green lawns of IIT stretched out I delight. The trees smiled, the birds sang, the tall MS building shone and, our lectures over, we chirruped at the Holistic Food Centre, a cosy mess in IIT.

The month of October is ideal for plotting and planning. The weather invigorates you thoroughly. The mind is fresh and a smile adorns your face all day. In the heart joys abound, and in the mind idea. You don't have to worry about wiping the sweat off your brow, nor about crossing your arms to counter the winter chill. You don't have to bother about anything, just lie dormant in the mellow sun, while the mind ponders and does the necessary planning. The cool breeze brings with itself fresh ideas and the feeble sun is warm enough to ripen them. The breeze this year was sure an intelligent one.

All I had done for you the past two days was stretch out in the sun and let the mind wander and ponder. And now, I discussed the possibilities with two of my friends. "No way, *yaar*," I said in response to Rishabh, "My dad knows what a sloth I am. I wouldn't train for a day, he knows. One month and that too in Chennai! It will tell him all, 'Who's the gal, son?' he'll straightaway ask me.

Pritish, a sports freak like me, who was listening to it all quietly, suddenly erupted, "What about the Inter-IIT sports meet at Chennai in December? Perfect, man, perfect. No more discussion," he said rubbing his hands excitedly, as is his habit.

"You mean I should tell at home that I have been selected?" I asked disapprovingly.

"Why not?"

"I can't."

It pricked my conscience. I bet some of you will laugh at this sudden discovery. "Are you not betraying your parent's trust already?" you'd, no doubt, jibe and rub it in. but let me tell you that even the biggest knaves have some scruples. They all draw a line somewhere innocent women and children. And Tejas Narula would never hurt his father's pride in him and his achievements. If I'd tell him that I was playing for the college, he'd hug me and say, "Well done, son." And those very words would kill me.

He has always been so supportive and encouraging. A perfect dad. And to lie to him, who has blind faith in me, pains me no end. But you do understand, I hope, that meeting my love is not possible without keeping him in the dark. So I have no choice. But I better lie in a proper manner. Lie morally, you can say. It is not that bad to lie about what you did on a one-paisa tour; but to lie about winning gold in a marathon is too much. No, sir!

Rishabh reiterated, "I still maintain, get a training there."

"I told you, I can't" I said peevishly.

"Fine, you wish," he gave in, irritated.

"See, you don't need to get into all that hassle. You don't want to lie about Inter-IIT, you can't train, then just fake the Industrial Tour," summed up Pritish.

"Yes, I'll bunk the Industrial Tour and instead go to Chennai. That's the best chance I have. Only the risks involved are high. If, by any chance, my parents come to know, I'll be dead," I said.

"But how, man? How? They won't doubt you. And if they don't see anything fishy, they'll be normal," Pritish spoke, excited.

He had a point. And I knew it well, too. Over a life of lying and frauds one comes to know the importance of staying confident and calm. You can sell a ton of brass as gold if you have the right look on your face.

"The main problem is that if my phone is not reachable and they call any one of you, I can be in trouble."

"That we'll manage, *yaar*. We'll tell him that you are not with us but busy in some factory where your cell is not reachable, and that we'll ask you to call them..."

I felt I was closer to my Shreya already. As Pritish and Rishabh fought over my plans, as if it was they who were going, I sat back, withdrawing from the conference and was transported two thousand kilometers across the country – blue sky, blue sea,

cool breeze. And there I could see Shreya, with her hair blowing in the breeze, twenty paces from me in a white dress, angel like, adorned with the slightest of smiles, waiting for me to wrap her in my arms.

“Shhh,” said Prithvi suddenly, breaking my dream. “There comes Pappi...”

“So?” I asked.

“He is the tour in-charge.”

“Who is in charge, brothers?” came a booming voice from behind. It was Tanker – ‘The Lord of IIT’. Take note, you all, two critical characters have just made you acquaintance.

For now though, let us keep aside these men of importance. The air is magical, the mood romantic, and all that comes to the mind is Shreya.



JANUARY, THIS YEAR

For a long time now, I had wanted to ask her the question. Again. I had already asked once before. I had preparing myself for days now. “I have to ask her again,” a part of me said to myself, “I cannot let her play with my heart any longer.” But then another voice shouted from inside me, “You moron, it’s been only three months since you last asked the question. Don’t be hasty again.”

These conflicts are the worst. These voices, they fight like unruly street boxers and in the end leave you at sea, for no one wins. But then however much ambivalent you might be, you have to decide on something. You’ve got to play the referee and, after twelve good rounds raise one voice’s hand, forgive me for being abstract, and slip a garland around its neck.

I decided that I would ask her again. I was nervous as hell. She messaged me at about one in the noon that she’d call me after she got back home from college, that is, at around three. I visited the loo an absurd number of times. That, my readers, elucidates best the kind of effect a girl produces on a boy. And, in our case, a boy endowed with courage of no small measure. You must have gathered as much from the facts of the previous

chapters. You must have silently appreciated my guts and said to yourself, "Boy! He is fearless," and now you must be let down by my attitude. Well, all I can say is: have faith in my audacity. Even the bravest of souls totter sometimes. I bet that Hitler, himself, would have gone weak in his knees, faced with such a daunting task.

Bertram Wooster would have gulped in one of the famous Jeeves potions at a time as stressful as this. But I had no Jeeves by my side and am not much of an ethanol consumer. But the occasion demanded some. So I went to my refrigerator and took out a two- litre bottle of Coke. I poured it into one of my father's beer mugs which I sometimes use for cold coffee. I added some lime and drank my preparation just as Wooster drank Jeeves's to soothe his nerves before any enormous task. Coke, I am told, has caffeine; so it is bound to calm you down. It was the closest thing to vodka or rum that was available.

I glanced at the clock after each second. I walked up and down my room nervously, time and again felt a strange sensation in my stomach again and kept visiting the loo. This went on till three. I finished the entire bottle of Coke between these visits. But it did no good.

All this while, memory of the last time kept coming back to me. What if I get a "No!" again? I comforted myself by arguing that this time around things were better and surer. But hadn't I thought the same the last time too? Boy! That had been a painful night. I still remembered vividly the kind of effect it had on me.

It is worth recounting the story to you all. And I will begin from the beginning this time. It is high time I told you about myself more, about how my romance started.



JANUARY, THE YEAR BEFORE

January. What a lovely month! The month that brings with itself a fresh year. The month in which are born new hopes, new joys, new ideas, new expectations, new resolutions, new

everything. The month which is as fresh as the early morning dew.

January. The month that brought her.



Now that we've arrived to this point in the narrative where I must unfold before you a most unique episode, I must tell you all, my readers, that I was once a sceptic, a ridiculer of this thing called Fate. You may prefer to call it destiny or kismet or coincidence but since the mentioned episode I have known this entity as Mr. Fate. Though guiding my life since birth and, no doubt, yours, his movements were all but obscure to my eyes, until he chose to show up and how!

Now, lie back, all you lovers and let your mind slip back to that fortunate accident, that ingenious stroke of fortune which enabled you to meet your love. I do not talk about the moment you fell in love; no, I talk about the *accident*, that singular coincidence, when he or she, not yet your love bumped into your life. Now, forgive me, I ask you all to delete that incident from your life, though from it hinges your entire life, it is a scenario you shudder to contemplate, but do it; what remains is am also *parantha* without *aloo*.

So it was that Mr. Fate had planned a similar accident for me and had it been absent, no doubt, you would not be reading this book and I would still be a sceptic. But now a believer, as I continue the story, I urge you to become a believer too in the strange workings of Mr. Fate – destiny, kismet, coincidence et al – in whose hands we are mere puppets.

It was the eve of my birthday, I distinctly recall. Vineet, my dearest brother, was here on a vacation from U.S., along with our *bhabhi* (not Vineet's wife) and it was going to be a grand birthday, what with their presence gracing the event after a long time. Although a character of significance in this story and my life, my brother has only a guest appearance here and I will talk about him in detail later.

We were planning the morrow after my classes at *bhabhi's* place when she suggested going to a movie.

And, now, I shudder to contemplate the scenario if she hadn't done so. Would someone else have? If not, then how would I have met Shreya? There are other ifs and buts – the cinema halls could have been different, the show timings...what not... That it was meant to be is all that comes to my lips.

And so it was that *bhabhi* uttered:

"Let's watch a movie tomorrow. Is that SRK starrer out?"

"Yes; it is good, I have heard," I said.

"Great, we'll watch the eleven o'clock show and then head towards your home to celebrate your birthday with *Chachi's* yummy cakes."

My mom is famous for them.

"Tejas, call Palak and ask her if she can come tomorrow; it'll be fun if all kids get together. But Sneha will have school, I guess," said *bhabhi*. If all kids get

"Yes, Sneha won't be able to come, but I'll ask Palak right away."

Time to start the introductions, I guess. Sneha and Palak are my younger sisters, and if you are curious about the whole real sister and cousin sister thing which interests me the least, you'll say that Palak is my cousin and that Sneha is the real one. For me both are sisters, dear and loving. We are of the same age group being born within two years of each other. As with all sisters, they are hugely possessive and do not approve of my uncivilized habits and frivolous nature. Their ultimate aim remains to tame me into a presentable young man. A pursuit which has borne no fruit and that despairs them most along with my mom and my *didi*, Ria *didi*, who is another cousin sister, the only one older and seven years that. There'll be more on her later. A lot more.

So I called up Palak without wasting any time. She had been at odds with me and Vineet lately because we were spending most of our time roaming here and there, and not with her at home. And well, God save a brother when his sis has drawn the sword.

"Hi sis! College over!"

"Yes, I just entered home. And you must be *enjoying* yourself," she said with sarcasm.

"Of course, you know I enjoy myself everywhere."

"Blah-blah... People like you and your brother, who have no other work in life but to hop from one place to another..."

"Like a cat on a tin roof..."

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