

The Fake Mask

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Prologue

The boy lying in bed knew the counsellor well. And he knew that the job was taking a toll on the counsellor. The swollen eyes and blackness beneath them were prominent. The counsellor was frustrated with his latest case of a student in depression. When he mentioned the word indifference, the boy in bed repeated, “Indifference?” The counsellor explained about indifference, and the boy wondered if he had missed the signs. He wondered if he could have saved a life? He reflected on the incidents leading to the day.

Chapter 1 - College blues

I stood anxiously in the woods. The date bothered me; the email mentioned that we'd meet on 1st April 2002 at 5 pm; was it intended to be an April Fool's joke? I arrived early since I couldn't bear the tension. Not a soul ventured behind the canteen, and I felt this was a perfect spot to have picked. Another 5 minutes to go. My heart kept thudding louder as the seconds ticked by.

At 5:05 pm, I noticed a shadow growing beside the left wall of the canteen. Behind one followed a larger one. When their faces appeared, I was disappointed. I knew the second face: that was our super senior, whom we nicknamed the Bear. The other wasn't familiar, but he surely was a senior. I thought they might have come to smoke in the woods, but they walked towards me with their eyes focused on me. I kept reminding myself that I needn't be afraid of them because I was on the verge of stepping into the second year and the fresher's party was also over.

The unknown senior spoke first, "Hey there. Who are you waiting for?"

"Nothing; no one," I lied.

"What's your name?"

"Moorthy."

As the two seniors closed the gap, I inched backwards. They looked at each other and laughed in a villainous way. There was no use in running because I had told them my name. It would be a matter of time before they found me. My mind went blank.

"How long will you wait here?"

"I don't know. For few minutes. Just like that."

The unknown senior came within striking distance and asked, "What? You think I'm a fool?"

I didn't like his tone. He stared at me as if he wanted to burn me with his eyes. I avoided them. The Bear was silently watching us.

"No," I replied meekly.

"Who asked you to come here?"

"No one," I lied again. For whatever question they threw at me, I gave a negative reply immediately. I wasn't trying to be brave but in the fear of the moment I was responding without thinking.

"What's your email id?"

"moorthy999@yahoo.com."

The evil smile on the senior's face was replaced by a scowl. Within a blink of my eye, I felt pain on my left cheek. He slapped me so hard that my spectacles fell and the one notebook that I held flew away. Along with that I also crashed to the ground.

"If you dare poke your nose again, I will kill you," he threatened me.

I was still on the floor, slowly trying to get up by holding a tree. Strange as it may sound, at this point, I was more worried about what would happen if the actual person I was waiting for arrived. I didn't want to be seen in this state.

"I. I... didn't do anything," I replied. I could have shut my mouth instead of blurting lie after lie. This lie ensured I didn't get up; his right hand struck my head, and I was back in the sand. Lying flat on my stomach, I could see the college road through the trees. I wished I was on that road; someone would have seen me, some staff would be passing by, and they wouldn't let this happen. The college road connected to the main road; that's how I first arrived in this place with fear for a different reason.

September 2001

I had a strange feeling of fear and anxiety, as if I were going to enter an operation theatre. But all I was doing was stepping into a bus with the words 'RCT' painted on the side. On my mom's advice of sitting in the front to avoid backache, my parents took the first row while I took the window seat behind them. We were the only ones on the bus, and even the driver who helped us load our luggage was surprised that we came so early. That was again on my mom's advice of better early than late.

I felt comforted when I saw others enter the bus; at least I wasn't in this situation alone. Since I was not keen on making any conversation, I kept my head firmly turned towards the window. The uneasy sensation refused to subside; I felt like throwing up the little I had eaten for breakfast. I'm sure that if I mentioned this to my mom, she would come up with some instant remedy on the bus. After what seemed like ages, the bus finally began moving, and we were soon in top gear. The driver tried his best to avoid using the brakes and drove as if he were competing in a car race. The city scenes were replaced by farms. To the driver's advantage there was hardly any traffic at this early morning hour on a Saturday. The strong breeze hitting my face overshadowed my thudding heartbeat. The husband and wife near me were talking nonstop about how good RCT was. The father would say something about some review he read, and then the mother would say something that her neighbour told her about the college being the best. I had hardly heard anything about this college; in fact, I had hardly heard about any college in India except for IIT, REC and BITS. And those colleges didn't like my 12th-grade scores. It was my uncle, an arts college lecturer, who told my parents that RCT was good for engineering and his word was sufficient for my parents to make a decision.

There is this innate nature in me and in many Indians to place our right foot first whenever entering a place, and I did the same when stepping into the RCT first years boys hostel. Flashing all their teeth were two boys who greeted us; one was very fair and handsome, while the other sported a French beard and earrings like a movie villain. I nicknamed one Smarty and the other Rowdy. I was sure Rowdy wasn't a first-year student, but Smarty could have passed off as a 10th grader. What a strange pair together! The two guided us to the Warden's room; it was odd that they led the way because the first room you see on entering the block is the Warden's room. The Warden's first word

on seeing my dad was, “Cheque.” Not even an introduction. When my dad handed it to him, he announced, “Room number 36.”

Rowdy was immediately at our service; he led me to my room two doors away. He waited an unusually long time after showing us the room; was he expecting tips?

The room had a dark green metallic bunk bed, two windows, a tube light, a ceiling fan, four small desks and chairs in the same dark green colour. I unrolled my mattresses while my dad opened the windows and tested the switches. My mom was busy spreading old newspapers on each shelf in the cupboard. Moms think of so many things in advance; she brought a stack of old papers just for this. Hardly 15 minutes had passed before Rowdy showed his face again with an evil smile.

“Breakfast is ready in the mess. It’s there,” he pointed at the building across the dry lawn. Rowdy hung around for a few minutes eyeing everything in the room before leaving.

The mess wasn’t in a mess. When I stepped in, I was struck by the smell of detergent. The mess was huge with umpteen tables and benches. In the centre stood a middle-aged man whose protruding belly was supported by the table. There were a couple of large trays: one had yellow noodles, and the other was supposed to contain tomato sauce. If it weren’t for the label, you would have assumed it was tomato soup, not sauce. There was also a large stainless steel drum with a tap at the bottom. The sticker on it read ‘Tea’. My nausea sensation was back; I’m not sure if it was the sight of the soup or the smell of the mess, but I didn’t feel like having anything. My parents ate well, and they commented, “The food is very good.”

My mom began her lecture, “You didn’t eat breakfast also. Two idlis is not enough for a growing child like you. How will you study if you eat so little?”

Studying was not even on my mind; I didn’t know how I’d survive in this mess.

After breakfast, my parents left. My mom wanted to arrange all my things, but dad had to see a friend in the city. When they left the campus, my nauseous feeling was replaced by my heart beating louder. I was having alternate bouts of both since morning. Back in my room, I tried lying down on the bed for a while but felt restless. Who would be my roommates? How will they be? Will they be good guys? My thoughts were interrupted when someone slammed open the dark green metal door. At the entrance stood a plump boy with a thin French beard and a thick bracelet. The only thing missing in his attire was an earring. He had a suitcase much larger than mine. Here was my first roommate, who was a perfect fit for junior Rowdy.

He announced in a strong, loud voice, “I’m Trevor.”

“I’m Moorthy,” I replied, trying to match his voice.

He looked around the room as if searching for something. “What’s this? I want the lower bed.”

My mattress was already on the lower bed. I wondered if he would fight like they do in movies and quickly assessed my options. I was no match for his size, but I didn't intend to give up my position easily. I could dodge him if he tried to fight, and the Warden's room was just two rooms away. All my imaginations were swept aside when he said, "I'll check with the warden."

So much for planning out a fight sequence! Out of curiosity, I followed him outside.

He interrupted the Warden, who was talking to Rowdy. "There is only one bed in room 36," he complained.

Rowdy scowled; he wasn't happy with a fresher interrupting his conversation. But Trevor didn't even glance at Rowdy.

"Ah yes. Another bed will come in the evening. You can take room number 136 on first floor. It has a beautiful view."

Off went Trevor towards his parents, pulling his large suitcase. I went from room to room searching for a loner, and my perseverance paid off. In room number 54, there was a typical north-Indian boy. He was of medium complexion, a squarish face with a little stubble, a decent physique and hairy arms.

"Hi, I'm Moorthy," I introduced myself.

He observed me for a minute before replying, "I'm Sankalp."

"In ECE?"

"No. Electrical, triple E."

Sankalp was just like a regular Indian kid; if he were lost in a crowd, it would be hard to spot him. After a little chit-chat, he cautioned me, "Be careful of that senior."

"Who? The one with French beard?"

"Yeah. 3rd year. Founder of the RCT challenge. He's dangerous in ragging."

"RCT challenge?"

"Yeah," he replied as if I was supposed to know what it meant.

"Seniors stay with us?"

"No. On the first day, they come to observe potential targets."

"Targets?"

"Yeah; for ragging."

"But what will they know today?" I asked.

Sankalp folded his clothes and arranged them neatly in the cupboard. "Lots. Depending on the stuff you pull out from your bag, they will know if you're rich."

"They won't rag rich guys?" I couldn't connect ragging and money. Why would the seniors differentiate between who they ragged; maybe they were afraid of rich people?

"You have no idea about ragging?" he asked as if I were an alien. "Which school are you

from?”

“From Muscat.”

“You’re an NRI!” he exclaimed in disbelief.

I was surprised he knew Muscat. For most people, I’d have to tell Dubai or Saudi; those were the only places in the Gulf that everyone knew. An NRI is a Non Resident Indian. Technically, right now I wasn't an NRI since I would be spending most of my four years in India in this college.

He whispered, “NRIs are hot targets. They ask for money, or they ask you to buy them drinks. Keep a low profile.”

Now I knew why Rowdy was doing surveillance. But I never knew that ragging was done to extort money.

“What about Smarty, the other guy with Rowdy?”

“You already made nicknames. Smarty! Yea. He’s handsome; you can say that. He’s an apprentice.”

“Apprentice?”

“Don’t tell me you don’t know what’s an apprentice?”

“Someone in training?”

“Yeah, under training. He’s in 2nd year.”

“Training for ragging?”

“Yes.”

I couldn’t imagine Smarty ragging; he looked like a kid himself. Seeing Sankalp unpacking, I felt guilty that I wasn’t doing anything; I hadn’t even started, but he was almost done. I walked slowly to my room to avoid attracting the attention of Rowdy. In my room, there was a heavily tanned boy talking to his dad. He was my first roommate, Pavan. I spent an hour unpacking, after which we headed for lunch. Pavan’s dad also accompanied us. While crossing the lawn, I shouted, “Sankalp, come for lunch.” I turned back cautiously and saw Rowdy staring at me. Our eyes met for just a brief moment before I looked away. How stupid of me to attract attention.

As I neared the mess, the uneasiness was back with a bang. I wanted to return to my room, but I didn’t feel safe alone with Rowdy still lingering outside. The two idlis were digested by now, but I still felt like throwing up when I saw the huge trays of dishes in the mess. Sankalp commented, “They have a variety of food.”

While I struggled with my first chapatti, someone reasoned, “It’s because today is the first day. They want to impress the parents.”

Variety or not, I could not even finish the few things I had on my plate. To add to my misery, the others went for a couple more rounds. Pavan’s dad was all praise for the quality of the food. The mess frightened me more than the thought of ragging.

Chapter 2 - The admission

September 2001

Deepu was furious in the car. He cursed, “Sushanth is an ass. Asshole.”

The driver knew only a few words in English, and ass wasn't part of his vocabulary. But judging by the expressions on Deepu's face, he knew the teenager was angry. He assumed the boy wasn't mad at him because Deepu was looking down while shouting. Deepu was drenched in sweat, and unlike regular days when he would wipe it off, he didn't bother today. The towel and water bottle remained untouched in the corner. Even after the fifteen minutes drive, Deepu had only gotten angrier. The driver, who had joined the job eight months ago, had never seen Deepu in such a mood. Until now, he had the impression that the teenager was charming, polite and well-disciplined.

The old watchman pushed open the gates. As soon as the car stopped, Deepu got down and slammed the door hard. The driver instinctively said, “Dheerae Deepu,” but the boy was already out of earshot.

Deepu pressed the doorbell three times and waited impatiently for the butler, Raghuramji, to open the door. Before the butler could say a word, the boy rushed inside. Even though he was tired, he ran up the stairs to his bedroom. The sound of the door slamming could be heard all over the house. He removed his T-shirt in a hurry and wiped some sweat off his chest. He sunk to his knees and punched the pillow a few times while muttering, “Damn Sushanth. Damn that fatso.”

Feeling exhausted, he lay flat on the carpet. His breathing was heavy, and he watched the picture that stared back at him from the blue ceiling. For a few minutes, he lay still with only his chest moving up and down. A few tears trickled down his face. He wondered why Sushanth had to bring it up now. The cricket game was going well till Deepu stepped in to bat and Sushanth, who was in the opposition team, opened his mouth. His comments upset Deepu and made him throw away his wicket while trying to slam the ball outside the playing field. No one offered him any support; they either ignored the comments or laughed along with Sushanth. He didn't want to be friends with anyone in that group.

Once his breathing returned to normal, he stretched his left hand to switch on the computer. Perhaps a game of chess would help.

He logged into Yahoo games and created a new virtual table. The first opponent who showed up was ssusant1999. Almost immediately, he was about to boot the opponent out of his table but then wondered if it were the same Sushanth this was a golden opportunity to thrash him. And even if it wasn't the same Sushanth, it didn't matter – at least it would make him feel better. And so he clicked 'Start game.' He played aggressively, but his position deteriorated with every move. His day was worsening, and it was only a matter of time before ssusant1999 would wrap up the game.

“Shit.”

To avoid facing defeat, Deepu shut down the computer. Losing to ssusant1999 was something he couldn't digest. Yahoo would still mark him as the loser, but at least he didn't have to see the result on the screen saying ssusant1999 was victorious. The anger from the cricket field was replaced by frustration. Nothing was going right for him today.

When he flipped off the monitor's switch, he noticed a white envelope under the computer speaker. Raghuramji would always place letters for him under the speaker, fearing that they would fly away in the wind if he opened the window. He saw the sender's address and felt it must be an advertising pamphlet. But on opening it, he was surprised to see a letter from a nonprofit organisation asking him to deliver a speech next month. He had done it once earlier, and it was a thrilling experience because it was the first time he addressed an audience of around 100 people. He wondered whether to take this up or not. Deepu walked to the full-size mirror, which hung on the wall on the other side of the room. There was only one topic that came to his mind—it was about individualistic behaviour in a crowd. He rolled the letter like a mike and imagined that he was addressing a crowd. On seeing his body, he smiled. There were no contours of biceps or triceps, but he still tightened his arm like a bodybuilder.

“A very good evening to all.”

He assumed that he was standing on stage addressing a crowd. He even made gestures and imagined how the crowd would react during his speech. He came up with numerous examples to quote. He felt confident that it would be a good speech. His dad always said that during practice you will know whether the final speech will turn out to be good or not.

It had been 30 minutes since he started speaking, and he had lost track of time. There was a slight knock on the door.

“Deepu?”

It was his dad, and he knew that Deepu shut the door whenever he was in a bad mood. His dad was also forewarned by the butler.

When Deepu opened the door, his dad said, “Get ready and come. We have to go for the

movie.”

“I’ll have a bath and come.”

After having a shower, he went down the spiral staircase with the letter in hand. There was still an hour for the movie. When Deepu entered the main hall, his father said, “I have a letter for you.” He passed the orange envelope to Deepu. Though his father hadn't opened the envelope, he knew what it contained. Deepu had a large smile on his face as he read the letter. His college admission was confirmed. The name registered on college records was just the way he wanted it. To avoid having a debate with his father again on this topic, he said, “I also have a letter.”

Saying so, he handed the letter from the nonprofit organisation to his dad and went to the prayer room near the staircase. A couple of letters had changed his mood for the better. After saying a quick prayer, he made a phone call to his best friend to tell her the news. His dad had a half smile on reading the other letter. Deepu was excited while talking on the phone. He didn't tell her about the Sushanth incident but wondered whether he should tell her the truth. How long can I hide it from her? And how will she feel if she hears of it from someone else?

Chapter 3 - Day 1

1 April 2002

The unknown senior stood near me, examining my stuff. He picked up my book and flipped through it.

“Moorthy,” he muttered, seeing my name on the first page.

Thank God I didn't lie about my name to him.

Seeing nothing of interest in the book, he turned his attention towards me. Sankalp had given us tips on handling ragging. Be minimalistic in everything, he said; don't carry fancy bags, don't wear any branded clothes; same applies to watches, spectacles, jewellery, shoes and pens. Never keep anything extra in your books.

The Bear hadn't even uttered a word till now. He was huge; if he accidentally fell on me, I was sure to have a few broken bones. I could have shouted for help; someone from the canteen might hear me, but I didn't due to the fear of getting thrashed again. I just waited.

“Just because you are in the end of the first year, you think you are a senior now? Suddenly got guts to poke your nose in our affair?”

“No. I'm not doing anything,” I said softly.

“Daaaaaiiiii... don't lie,” he shouted and whacked my face again.

That statement wasn't a lie. I really didn't know why he was so wild with me. I touched my face to see if there was blood, but there was none. At that moment, the Bear noticed my wallet. Wallets are dangerous. Sankalp advised us to only carry money for two samosas and nothing more. The Bear pulled it from my pocket as if it were his own. I had a surge in fear; would the Bear just look at the money, or would he check everything in the wallet? Sankalp told us never to keep any photos except that of our parents if we really needed to. Even then, he told us to keep pictures where the background didn't give away any information about us.

The Bear had a mischievous grin as he pocketed the little money I had and then showed something in my wallet to the other senior.

“What's this?” the senior asked me, showing the one photo I had in my wallet.

I knew I was screwed.

It was strange that on the very first day it wasn't me who first spotted the face in that photo.

September 2001

I was literally pushed out of my room by the telephone attender at 7:55 even though we were supposed to assemble in the auditorium only at 8:30. We had a shortcut road that joined with the college road, and the Warden led us on this path. The other route to college was by the main road, which ultimately merged with the college road.

“Every day, you will go to college only by this route,” he thundered like an army general.

Sankalp whispered, “To avoid ragging. The main road is risky.”

Sankalp, Pavan and I walked together while my second roommate, Jeyaprakash, walked alone.

Sankalp pointed at him and said, “He better be careful. Seniors target loners.”

“But we’re safe in this route.”

“Only for now. After a few days, no staff will accompany us. That’s when they strike.”

Jeyaprakash had chubby cheeks and a babyish face that made him look like a baby scientist. It would be sad to see him getting ragged, but what if he was ragged by Smarty? What a comical sight that would be - one kid ragging another!

On the college road, we saw girls walking in a group just like us. They had taken the main road and were escorted by a few women staff. After fifteen minutes of slow walking, we reached the audi (auditorium in college terminology is called audi). At this point, there was no separation between the boys and girls, and a few guys shamelessly smiled at the girls. Sankalp even tried saying hi to a couple of them. All the while, I kept my head away from the girls. There were boards placed in the audi which read ‘I ECE’, ‘I Civil’, ‘I Mech’ and so on. Sankalp went to find his class, but I was certain that he’d follow the two girls to whichever class they were in. As I settled near Pavan, I noticed Trevor was next to us. At the end of the same row, there was a madam seated who shouted, “Name?”

“Moorthy,” I shouted back.

She looked at her tiny book and flipped the page. Her eyebrows kept going closer as she scanned the page, and suddenly there was a slight smile, accompanied by her eyebrows drifting apart.

It was 8:40 am when the assembly started. It was boring with the Vice Principal and Principal giving a couple of speeches. The Vice Principal made some big claims that we were among the top engineering colleges and a reputed brand.

“It’s all gas,” Pavan said. Gas means it’s all made-up stories that are too good to be true.

Our class had dark green metallic benches - the exact same colour used in our hostel. I was worried before entering that I would see a classroom with girls and boys sitting together merrily. I guess that happens only in movies. Thankfully the girls sat together near the window benches. Pavan and I picked a place close to the door and farthest from the girls. The thought of 20 girls looking at me was frightening. I had never studied in a coed in Muscat and knew I didn't have great looks; Pavan was more handsome than me. Our first period was Chemistry, taught by a bald professor.

"In my school, I used to bunk classes daily," Pavan said with pride while sir was fiddling with his book.

It was hard to judge where our professor was looking because his glasses rested at the tip of his nose while his eyes hovered all over the place.

"Silence," he screamed suddenly, and it felt like he was looking at us. His eyes swept the room from right to left, from the boys to the girls. Satisfied with the silence, he opened his tiny green book and called out, "Jootindranath Chakrooborthy."

"Yes sir," a hand shot up from the middle of the room.

"Stand up when answering attendance," he commanded and then repeated, "Jootindranath Chakrooborthy."

"Yes sir." The boy reluctantly stood up, feeling shy that he had such a long name.

Sir had a good look at him and said, "Gooood. Sit down."

He continued calling more names from the green book, and I realised that he wasn't going in any order—he just called names randomly to mark attendance. Out of curiosity, I took the opportunity to peek at the girls when they stood up. Perhaps they were also secretly eyeing the guys? At any moment, if I felt any girl was looking in my direction, I'd turn my head towards Sir.

Each period was 50 minutes duration, and our professor didn't waste any time in introductions. He closed the green note and announced, "We have a lot to cover. We will not waste any time in class. We already lost so much time today because of the special assembly."

He quickly scribbled the first chapter name on the blackboard with so much force that I thought the chalk piece would break.

Our timetable was scribbled in the corner of the blackboard. At 10:30, our second period ended, and we had a tea break. I dreamt they would provide us with tea and biscuits but discovered that a tea break was just a formal name for a toilet break. The seventh and last period for the day ended at 4:10 pm. The entire first-year block headed back to the mess in a herd. I don't know why, but I ran out of the classroom first; maybe it was due to my wild imagination that some girl would want to talk to me.

Sankalp joined us in the mess for the evening snack: samosa and tea. It was the only time I didn't feel uncomfortable in the mess; I was still struggling with breakfast, lunch and dinner.

"How many girls in your class?" was the first question Sankalp asked.

"18 girls and 30 guys," Pavan replied.

"Lucky."

"Why?"

"Only 10 girls in our class," Sankalp said.

I would have liked to be in his class.

"Cheer up. Mechanical doesn't have any girls. And few more students will join later this week."

"Anyone interesting? I heard of Linda."

I was about to say that we don't know who is who yet, but Pavan responded, "She looks good. Also, there is Niveditha and Preity."

I almost uttered, "You know the girls already?" but held back. I didn't want them to know my lack of general knowledge. I was shy to even look in the direction of the girls, but he remembered names and faces.

Chapter 4 - The confession

Deepu discovered the Ritz Bhavan restaurant a few months earlier when the new driver lost his way one evening while returning from tuition class. The name was odd, but the restaurant was good. But today, he knew he wouldn't be able to focus on the food. He was worried about how he'd open the topic to Anita. He replayed the scene again mentally as the car came to a halt outside the restaurant. Rehearsal is important—his dad used to advise him. Visualise everything beforehand, and you won't be in for a surprise. A smartly dressed doorman smiled at him and opened the door. He didn't return the smile because he didn't even look in the doorman's direction. The lights were not too bright. His eyes searched for Anita; she was seated near the window. She waved at him in excitement. "Hi! You're late as usual."

"No I'm not. It's 7:30 only now."

"On your watch." She pointed at the dial on her left hand that read 7:40.

Deepu was tempted to blurt what he had in mind but felt it would be too abrupt. So he had to wait a few minutes and then slip in his thoughts.

"What's up? Why suddenly? Celebrating your admission?" she asked him as she sipped water. She looked graceful in her white salwar. Her sense of dressing was something that Deepu admired. It was to be expected of her because her family was in the textile business.

"Err... No... No... It's been a long time so just thought of meeting you."

Anita found his reason strange because Deepu usually preferred meeting in one of their homes rather than in restaurants.

"What about your admission?" he asked. He didn't know what to talk about except the one thing that was running in his mind since the Sushanth incident. But he didn't want to start with it.

"Commerce is easy. Not like engineering. I'll get it by next week. I don't know why people are so mad about engineering." She hated the science subjects—especially Physics and Chemistry.

Just then, the waiter interrupted them to take their order.

Why do they always come at the wrong time?

"Regular?" she asked Deepu.

"Yes."

She reeled out the list of items and also desserts for both of them. She knew all his preferences.

"Before coming, I talked to my cousin in the US."

“The one in New Jersey?”

“Ya. She stays in New Jersey and works in New York. She was telling about the situation there. Initially, we couldn’t even reach her.”

It was just four days since the September terror attacks in the US. Deepu had watched the collapse of the World Trade Center on television.

She continued, “I can’t believe people would do such an awful thing—to plan and kill so many lives. God. Awful.” The image of a person jumping from the top while the building was on fire deeply disturbed her.

Deepu had seen people being awful without thinking of the consequences. “Innocent people killed. People who would never have dreamt that their life was going to end that day. Killed by people who had never seen them before; had no idea who they were. Just like that take away the life of a stranger. So much hatred in this world.”

What gave the right to someone to take another person’s life? What gave the right to someone to make fun of another person?

For a while, both of them didn’t speak.

“Err... Anita...”

She sensed something was wrong with Deepu from the time he stepped into the restaurant. Deepu struggling for words was unusual.

“Something wrong?” she asked him.

“Err... Yeah... No... I’ll be back in a minute.” Saying so, he rushed to the toilet. He locked the door and turned on the tap. He was sweating profusely as if he had run a 100-meter sprint. He tried taking deep breaths and counting to ten like his dad used to say, but nothing worked. Fear had gripped him; fear of losing a good friend. He could let it pass by not bringing up the topic, but he would rather she heard it from him. He realized it was easy telling certain things to strangers, but when it came to someone close, it was hard to do so - the fear of losing worried him.

How long can I keep hiding it? It has to come out someday. I have to tell her now.

Chapter 5 - Boats in hostel

1 April 2002

“Whose photo is this?” the unknown senior repeated while flashing the pretty girl’s face close to my eyes.

“I don’t know,” I replied.

“Daiiiii...,” he hit me again. “Who is she?”

I didn’t want to tell her name. “I don’t know how it came. It’s not mine.” Another lie.

I tried using a tree as support to get up from the floor, but a couple more slaps on my cheek ensured that I didn’t.

The Bear intervened, “Iver, enough. Leave it.”

“This guy acts as if he knows nothing. See what he’s carrying,” and he gave another slap. I stayed low; whenever I got up, the slap was fierce.

So the senior’s name is Iver, but the name still didn’t ring a bell. What did I do to upset Iver?

Iver tore the photo into small pieces and threw them on me. But the light breeze ensured that the pieces flew in the air away from me. That act of nature angered him further. He scowled.

The Bear, in his calm manner, gave me some words of wisdom, “You came to study. So do that and don’t play with others.”

Iver asked me, “What? Love eh? I’ll kill you.”

This time he gave a hard hit with his knuckle on my head.

“Will you do it again?”

My head was spinning. I still didn’t know what he was referring to. “I didn’t do anything... I don’t know what you are saying...”

And then came one more blow. My left ear hurt.

“You beware,” Iver warned me.

Suddenly there was silence. I don’t know when they left because for a few minutes I just lay there in the mud scared to get up. I looked around to confirm that they weren’t hiding in the trees. When I was certain that they had departed, my mind relaxed a little. I longed to return to the safest enclosure in our first-year hostel, a place I dreaded a few months back.

September 2001

I made it a point to watch the girls in class during our next Chemistry period to keep up with Pavan's general knowledge. Compared to the outfits that guys wore, the girls sported a much broader range of colours. Some had a thick layer of glossy makeup, while others had none. Of the 3 girls that Pavan mentioned, it was Preity who I found interesting because she didn't use any makeup. Unfortunately, since many students were sitting in between us, it was tough for me to see her during classes.

Pavan and I had gotten into the habit of waking up by 5:30 am, very early according to hostel standards. The water was very cold, and till a couple of weeks back, I had never taken a bath in such cold water and inside such a small enclosure. Now I realised that a water heater was a luxury item I took for granted in Muscat. I was learning in hostel to get used to what I had. By 6:45 am, all bathrooms would be packed with students and there would be queues extending outside. It was a common sight to see guys banging the toilet doors with one hand while holding a mug in the other and shouting, "What are you doing so long? Having constipation? Ate too much?" With the entry of more freshers in the last couple of weeks, the bathroom scene was an amusing drama. I was happy to be a spectator than an actor.

My third roommate, Sakthivel, woke up very late unaware of the morning chaos. At 7:30, when Pavan and I returned from breakfast, we saw him coming with a mug in hand. He uttered in disgust, "Yuck. The guys leave boats. Damn."

"Boats?" I asked him.

"Ya. Big boats. They sit, shit and leave. Why don't they bother to put a few mugs to flush it out?"

Pavan and I burst into laughter. It reminded me of another luxury item in Muscat—you could just push a lever to flush the toilet. I was happy that I never had to encounter boats; I always had a clear lake early morning.

As we neared the audi, we would always lose Sankalp. He'd start talking to some girl and disappear into the crowd. He had already made friends while I was trying hard to avoid my instinctive reaction of turning my face away whenever a girl looked in my direction. So far, none of the guys had noticed, but I'm sure once they found out they would start pulling my leg. As soon as I took my seat in the audi, a teacher walking briskly past us suddenly turned around and waved her

finger in my direction. I stood up hesitantly, and she ordered, "Come here." She asked me to join a line of boys outside the other end of the audi; they were silently standing with their chests puffed, heads stiff like dolls and only their eyes moving. Just as she disappeared, two men in black arrived on the scene and glanced at the four of us. One of them said, "Okay, you must welcome the founder. He'll come in a few minutes." The other man said, "These two can give the bouquet and garland." The man was pointing at me. The other guy was Sankalp at the other end. Both of us hadn't noticed each other till then.

When the men in black disappeared, I asked, "What's wrong with you guys? Standing like mummies?"

The two guys in between us made weird facial expressions as if I were speaking Latin.

Sankalp, looking straight without turning his head, warned, "That maam screamed at us. Be quiet."

Right on cue, the men in black reappeared in front of us. "Quiet. Stand in line."

They noted our names and branches. I wondered if they were going to take disciplinary action against us. These men in black meant business. As we stood, four girls dressed in saris walked by. I told myself that I shouldn't keep turning my head away and should instead face the girls. As the third girl went past me, she smiled. To my surprise, it was Preity, and I wondered who she was smiling at. I turned around, expecting to see someone, but there stood only a lifeless staircase. The girls also assembled in a line beside ours. I tried to get a glimpse of her again, hoping to return a smile, but unfortunately, she was blocked from my view. I didn't have much time to think over the incident as a black car screeched to a halt in front of us. We greeted the founder with a warm smile. The men in black escorted him like bodyguards. I wondered if they carried guns. Standing outside, we could hear someone on stage announce, "It is a great privilege today to have our founder with us..." Then there was a roar of applause.

A peon standing behind us called us both backstage. My heart was pounding in anxiety. The stage was huge, and the entire audi was packed to capacity. This was just my second week in college, and I had to climb onto that colossal stage. As we stood idle backstage, my mind painted images of what might happen: what if I dropped the garland, what if I slipped on stage, what if I fell on the founder...I told myself I have to do it no matter what. There's no turning back now.

"Now I would like to call upon our first-year student..."

Sankalp whispered, "Go on." I started walking, and just as I appeared on stage, the voice continued, "...Mr. Sankalp from triple E department to garland our founder." I almost stopped in my steps. Obviously, there was some mix-up, but the spotlight was on me. The founder stood up. I couldn't go back now and send Sankalp to do the honours. I continued to walk towards the founder with the garland in hand, put it around his neck and shook his hand. The speaker continued, "I now

call upon Mr. Moorthy of first-year ECE to present a bouquet.” Sankalp smiled when I went past him. I descended the stairs and took a seat in the audience. My mind was wandering over the strange sequence of events that had occurred in the last few minutes, particularly that smile. Why did Preity smile? It was obvious that she smiled at me, which meant that she knew I was her classmate. For some reason, that thought gave me a lot of satisfaction; perhaps an optimistic belief that she was watching me in class! I should have had the courtesy of returning a smile. Damn! And they say golden opportunities don't knock twice.

Chapter 6 - Day 1

Deepu was excited as the car neared the RCT campus. He told the driver to drop him on the main road because he wanted to walk around campus. On seeing a staff near the administrative block, Deepu asked, “Has the assembly started?”

“Yes. It will be over soon.”

Deepu was disappointed.

The ECE classroom was empty. Deepu sat on the front row near the door. It wasn't long before he heard some noise outside. It was the girls who came in as a gang, and they glanced at the new boy in class before taking their seats near the window. The boys entered more noisily, and most occupied the back benches first. The table to Deepu's right and the one behind were unoccupied. Seeing Deepu alone in the front, one boy with thick black spectacles who looked like a bookworm came from two desks behind to talk to him. He asked, “Your name?”

“Deepu. And you?”

“Moorthy,” the nerd replied.

“Is this ECE?”

“Yes.”

Just then, the class became silent as the Physics teacher entered. Moorthy sat near Deepu and immediately looked around. Deepu could sense that Moorthy wasn't comfortable sitting in the front; he was worried about the others in the class. And now that he was in front, he was concerned about returning to his seat because that would attract attention.

Whenever the opportunity arose, Moorthy tried to learn more about Deepu, but there wasn't much that he extracted from him except that his father was a businessman and the name of the school in which he had studied. Deepu kept his replies short. He was assessing his classmates.

“Which room in hostel?”

“I'm not a hosteller.”

Moorthy was puzzled because everyone who studied in this college was a hosteller. The college was far from the city, and the management wanted everyone to stay in the hostel. The principal claimed that it helped the student develop holistically.

“How did you come to college?”

“By car.”

When returning to the hostel for lunch, Sankalp caught up with Deepu and Moorthy.

Deepu had Raghuramji’s lunch parcel in hand. “There’s no road here?” he asked as they trudged on the kutchra road. Kutchra was the slang for something that was not in proper order.

Sankalp replied, “With us walking every day, the road will automatically be created.”

Deepu felt like he was trudging in a forest with all the bushes and trees.

Moorthy asked, “Have you seen our hostel?”

“No. This is the first time.” Staying in hostel was something that he had argued about with his dad, but in the end had to compromise. He was happy his dad let him join college.

Deepu sensed that Sankalp was observing his attire. His shoes were cleanly polished, and he had picked dresses that wouldn’t attract attention. Only the tiny symbol on his pant’s back pocket indicated an expensive brand. The full-sleeve shirt was tailor-made, and it concealed his thin body frame.

To divert attention, Deepu commented, “It’s like a herd.” He was amused by the sight of everyone walking in groups.

“A herd of scared sheep!”

“Is there ragging?”

“Not yet, and the official word is that there is no ragging.” Sankalp quickly added, “But official word is gas.”

“What’s the RCT challenge? I heard some guys talking about it.”

Sankalp replied, “When seniors catch you for ragging, they’ll give you a chance to escape. If you win the RCT challenge, then you’re free.”

“What should we do?”

“Very simple. The Junior’s salute for one minute. Stand on your left leg with the other bent, raise your right hand waving ten times, then salute and continue waving and saluting for one minute.”

“That doesn’t sound simple.”

“That’s why they have it! No one has won it.”

When they returned after lunch to their classroom, Deepu noticed something amiss. His backpack was still on the first bench, but the position was different. He had left it at the edge of the bench, but now it was slightly away from the edge. Even the main zipper was not fully down; a small gap was visible. He was sure that someone had touched his bag. When they entered the classroom, there were only four boys who had come before them. Deepu immediately opened his backpack to

check if all the contents were intact. There wasn't much that he had – 4 notebooks and a diary. Everything was there, but he wondered if someone had read his diary?

He asked Moorthy, "Why do none of the guys bring a backpack?"

"Some used to. But we were warned against ragging. Carry as little stuff as possible. So we just bring the notebooks we need for the day. Leave it on the desk if we need it after lunch."

That was one of the reasons Deepu left his bag; he saw everyone leaving their books under the table, and since his backpack also had books, he left it. What he forgot was that he had a diary. Deepu couldn't tell if someone had seen his diary, but it bothered him.

"You write a diary?" Moorthy asked on seeing him flip through the pages.

"I do."

"I used to write long back in school."

"And now?"

"I stopped. My dad read the diary. After that, I stopped writing."

"Your dad said he read it?"

"No. But he mentioned something exactly as I wrote it in the diary. I knew he read it."

Deepu wondered if his dad had ever read his diaries. He believed that he didn't, but there was no guarantee. And today, he had no idea if one of his classmates had read it. If someone had, then he knew he was in for trouble sooner than expected.

Mrs. Josephine entered and stared intently at the boy on the first desk.

"Are you Deepak?"

"Yes," he replied and felt uncomfortable because, for a few seconds, all eyes were on him. He wondered if she would probe further, but instead, she said, "Ok," and continued sternly, "I find the first desks always unoccupied and overcrowding in the back. I want you all to sit in one place. Every day you keep changing places, and I don't know who is who. It is better if you sit in one place daily. I'll allot seats according to attendance. Only 2 per desk."

Everyone started murmuring, and she authoritatively commanded, "Silence. Of course, the boys and girls will sit separately."

She didn't mean horizontal rows but vertical rows with respect to the blackboard. The next fifteen minutes were lost in arranging the classroom. The students did their best to prolong settling down, and they were united in using this golden opportunity. Deepu's bench-mate was Sakthivel - the ordering was done based on attendance names, not first names. Moorthy had Mahmood as his desk-mate. Next to Moorthy's desk were the girls.

When the students finally settled, Mrs. Josephine announced, "I knew you'll take your own sweet time. That's why I'm continuing in the next period. Your English sir is on leave." The entire

class groaned softly. She had outwitted them.

After class, Moorthy asked Deepu, “How are you going back home?”

“My car will come to pick me up.” He knew his reply would surprise Moorthy because he was the only student staying outside the hostel and travelling by car. Putting on his backpack, he said, “Bye. See you tomorrow.”

“I’ll come with you till the car. Is it near our building?”

“No. It’ll come to the main gate.”

As they walked down the college road, Deepu noticed the half-built college canteen on the left side. Sankalp said it was forbidden for freshers to visit the canteen.

Deepu asked, “What happens in the morning assembly?”

“Some announcements, thought for the day for a few minutes and national anthem.”

“Does Devaraj sir deliver the message?”

“Sometimes he does.”

The two boys didn’t have to wait since the car was waiting for Deepu.

Deepu was happy with his first day in college. College, in a way, felt just like school, but school had been torture for him. He prayed that things would go smoothly here and decided to start a little earlier from home tomorrow so that he could be in time for the assembly session. Maybe tomorrow would be Devaraj sir’s turn? Deepu was in a dilemma on whether to carry his diary or leave it at home. In school, he always carried it because he used to pen his thoughts during the lunch break. The probability of someone reading it at home was lower than someone in college reading it.

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