

# JOINT STUDY

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To long-suffering students and teachers everywhere in the  
world

# 1

*"Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the hallowed arches of the ranged empire fall! Here,"* the young man said, shifting in his seat on a plush leather sofa, one arm stretched forward, *"is my space!"*

He was a remarkably good-looking young man of about 18 years of age, loose-limbed, full-lipped and with hazel brown eyes that suggested heritage from the north of India. His broad forehead was creased in dissatisfaction at that moment. A pout appeared on his chiselled face and he turned to his companion on one side, saying: "I think I need a break from this shit."

"That is literally the first page of the play, Azhar," said the companion, a tall and slim man with curly hair. He was perhaps a year older than the first and also in his youthful prime. He looked more South Indian, but a hint of Europe about his nose pointed to his Anglo-Indian heritage and the dimples on his slightly chubby cheeks gave him a benign appearance. The dimples made an appearance just then as he continued: "We have an exam on the whole play tomorrow!"

"Gah," the first man said, stretching his feet out and placing them on the coffee table in front of him, nudging away a set of classic English novels with his Nike trainers to make room. James Joyce tumbled over Jane Austen and struck a coffee mug, which miraculously stayed upright, though a trickle of coffee slopped down

towards the table and dripped onto the ancient Persian rug below.

Ignoring this, Azhar refocused on the copy of Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra* in his hand, the late evening sunlight falling on one side of his face, and stumblingly read out again: "*Kingdoms are clay: our dungy earth alike feeds beast as man: the nobleness of life ...* Dude, I literally have no idea what's going on. Do you?"

His companion cleared his throat, frowned at his own copy of *Anthony and Cleopatra*, and then looked about at the cluttered room as though for inspiration, his eyes moving over the crammed bookshelves, the ornate clock on the mantelpiece and the half-full drinks cabinet, before finally saying: "Maybe we should just wait for Harsha to come?"

"Yes! Now you're finally talking sense, Shane," Azhar said, dropping the book on the sofa next to him and stretching out his arms against the arms of the sofa, absentmindedly playing with a tear on the leather surface with his left hand. "That guy knows his shit. Though I still don't see how we'll get through this whole damn book tonight."

"No doubt we'll be burning the midnight oil," Shane chuckled, folding his arms and grinning at Azhar.

"*Burning the midnight ...* God, Shane, I can't take any of your clichés today! I haven't even had a smoke yet. No, no, I don't mean *that*," Azhar said, as Shane took out a packet of Wills Classic Milds cigarettes and made to offer it to his companion. "I meant *a joint*! My brain needs to be *stimulated*, man. Where's Juni? She should have been here ages ago with the weed."

"All good things come to those who wait," said Shane, dimpling again and putting his cigarettes away. Then, seeing the expression on the other's face, he quickly added: "She said she'll be here at 7. It's only 6.45. As for the exam, we just need Harry to come by and give us an overview. And Maya knows it pretty well too, I think."

Azhar jumped at this and hurriedly stood up from the sofa, bumping his shin against the coffee table in his haste, spilling more coffee in the process. "Maya? That pretty one? She's coming? Idiot, I would have had a shower if I'd known!"

"Azhar *bhai*, what is it like inside your head? We came up with this whole joint study idea so that Harsha and Maya could meet outside of university! You know how shy he is – and he *really* likes her."

Azhar stopped on his way to a door leading into the bedroom, and turned to Shane and said: "Hang on – you playing matchmaker or what? That never ends well! And Maya with *Harry*? I'm sorry dude, but you're dreaming. The guy needs to shape up first," he added, miming a huge pot belly in front of his own flat stomach. "And Maya is at least a seven. Maybe an eight."

"An eight what?"

"Eight out of ten, fool! Besides, she comes from a pretty conservative Tamil family, dude. I doubt they will want her to be getting cosy with a Bong."

"Bong? What are you babbling about, Azhar *bhai*, are you already stoned," Shane asked, chuckling. "There's no bong here as far as I can see."

"A Bengali, fool! Harsha is from Kolkata - or his father was or whatever, that's why he is always reading all this Shakespeare and whatnot. Bongs and all their culture vulture."

"So a conservative Tamil family will object to a Bengali boyfriend for their daughter - but will be ok with a Hyderabad Muslim?" Shane asked, pointing at Azhar and dimpling.

Azhar turned away loftily. "You don't understand. I just don't think Harsha has a chance."

A voice emerged from behind Azhar's sofa: "Harsha is the best! Anyone lucky to have him!"

Azhar and Shane jumped and turned to see where this disembodied voice came from.

"What the..." Azhar said, striding up to the space behind the sofa. "Richard! Ricky! You ... what the hell you doing behind my sofa?"

A short, slim young man emerged from above the leather and stifled a yawn. He looked around blankly and then rubbed one eye, looking at least six years younger than his 17 years of existence. "Just wanted to take a nap. Wanted a quiet place," he said, his accent betraying his North East Indian origins, as did his long cheekbones and a hint of narrowness about his fine eyes.

"Ricky... that makes no sense, dude," Azhar said, clapping him on the back. "How the hell did you even get into my apartment? Well, sit down here then!"

Shane grinned affectionately at the newcomer, who stumbled up

and took a few steps forward before collapsing onto the sofa. He then picked up the book that Azhar had discarded carelessly and peered blearily at it.

"What's this? *Anthony and Cleopatra*," he read out hesitantly.

The other two boys exploded with laughter.

"That's the book we are supposed to be writing an exam on tomorrow! That's why we are even here, Ricky," Shane said, in between chuckles.

Richard looked at him blankly and said: "Thought we were here to set up Harry and Maya. Forgot about the exam."

"Bugger, at least I know the *title* of the book," Azhar said.

Richard shook his head morosely: "Go easy on me today, guys. I had a shit day."

"What happened," Azhar asked casually, sitting down on the sofa next to Richard and stretching his legs out on the coffee table again, his plans for a shower forgotten.

"It was Professor T.K. Our English poetry professor," Richard said despondently.

"I know who he is, fool. What did he do?" Azhar asked, turning slightly to frown at Richard.

Richard just shook his head, so Shane volunteered: "He called Ricky a 'Chinaman' in class today." For once, there was no accompanying chuckle to his words.

"Ok, that's it," Azhar said, a scowl coming over his face. "He called me 'Osama Bin Laden's nephew' the other day. I've had enough of this racist bastard. We need to finish him off."

"What exactly can we do?"

"I don't know, dude – something! We are supposedly in the best university for arts in India and you have this racist fucker teaching students? It can't be right!"

"Nothing we can do," Richard said gloomily.

At this moment the front door to the apartment banged open and a petite young woman walked in, her rather classical Tamil appearance clashing with her punk rock chick vibe. There were rings on her nose, lips and fingers and a heavy skull pendant dangling from her neck. She had rolled back the sleeves of her baggy Black Sabbath t-shirt so that she could better carry plastic bags in either hand.

"Books for studying," she said in a businesslike manner, lifting one of the bags, "And weed for smoking," she added, lifting the other.

"Exactly how much weed are you planning to smoke, Juni? That bag looks bigger than the one with the books," Shane asked, smiling as he eyed the plastic bags in the newcomer's hands. "And I see you've brought the weed in a *Nalli Silks* plastic bag. A very clever disguise."

"Oy, shut up! The important thing is that the weed is here and we don't complain," Azhar said, hurriedly moving to one side of the sofa and clearing space on the coffee table by simply shoving all the books onto the floor by Shane's feet. Shane grinned and picked up a copy of Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* that had bumped up against his shin, leafing through its pages.

The newcomer - Junaina was her full name - stepped easily over Azhar's legs and then nudged Richard with her knee.

"Move your ass," she barked at him. Richard jerked to attention and looked up at her in alarm, before she pushed him to the edge and took up position in the centre of the sofa. Sitting down, she looked sideways at him and said cheerfully: "Why so gloomy, Ricky? Let's go puncture the tires on T.K.'s motorbike and that will be the end of the matter!"

"Are you going to roll a joint?" Richard asked her, ignoring her suggested solution to his troubles.

"Yeah, then what. I didn't come here to stare at your beautiful face."

As she set up shop on the coffee table, taking out all the implements needed for her operation, the door opened once again, and a somewhat rotund young man sidled into the room and pushed up his glasses to blink at the group in front of him. He looked like he would have been more at home in a maths tuition class than in a room full of university students about to partake of an illegal substance.

He wiped the knuckles of one pudgy hand on his loose, checked shirt and strengthened his grip on a beautiful, leather-bound edition of *Anthony and Cleopatra* clutched to his chest. In his other hand, he held a folder full of sheets neatly arranged in a folder with clear, colour-coded labels on them.

Despite the general nondescript appearance of this new entrant, the cheer that went around the room at his appearance was loud and long.



"Harsha! Finally!"

"Harry, boy, come on in!"

"You ready to teach us Shakespeare, Professor Harsha?"

Even Junaina looked up at his entrance and smiled her welcome. "Second most important thing we are going to do tonight," she said, eyeing Harsha's leatherbound copy of *Anthony and Cleopatra*.

"Man, we'd better get started," the newcomer, Harsha, said. He stumbled forward and looking for a place to sit down. "We don't have too much time!"

"Don't worry Harry, we're prepared to work into the wee hours of the morning," Shane said, dimpling.

Harsha gave a bark of laughter and then sat on the floor, his paunch leaning out of the sides of his loose jeans.

"Ok, let's begin with Act 1 Scene 1," he said briskly, opening the text.

"Wait, wait, wait! Let's smoke a joint first, then only our brains will get *stimulated*, man," Azhar said, walking up to Harsha and grabbing the book from his hand to prevent him from going any further.

"Maybe we should wait till Maya arrives," Shane said, slyly. "You don't want to waste your golden rhetoric on us."

"*Golden rhetoric!*" Harsha repeated, guffawing. But then he asked, casually: "Maya is coming, then?"

"Oh yes she is!" Richard said, a smile breaking out on his face for the first time, and he pumped his fist in Harsha's direction. "Your lady love!"

Harsha snorted at this and said: "She is as much my lady love as Azhar here is a Shakespearean actor," he said.

Azhar stopped pacing at this and gave a mock shudder. "Anything but that! Bollywood will do for me. I'll leave sitting in dusty libraries to you, Harry, and choose partying in Bombay any day! Just think..."

The doorbell rang again, breaking in on what promised to be a long account of the kind of life Azhar would lead in Bollywood. Instead, Azhar turned and went up to open the door one more time.

"Why, hello," he said, pulling the door back and bowing slightly. "How lovely that you could come!" he added, charm oozing out of his

voice.

Junaina looked up at this and said: "She's not the queen, you fool, so stop bowing and let her come in."

Azhar sheepishly moved out of the way, and a slender girl with a sweet face, dressed in a dark blue *salwar kameez* top and jeans walked in and looked around appreciatively.

"Hey Maya!" Shane said, winking at Harsha opposite him. "We were all just waiting for you to arrive."

## 2

Maya walked into the room. Her eyes took in the cluttered bookshelves, the drinks cabinet and the ragtag group of students seated in various poses on the sofa and chairs, and her smile widened.

"This is a great place, Azhar!" she said, with genuine enthusiasm.

"Well, you know ... good location, very central..." Azhar mumbled modestly.

"You must be living in a real dump if you think this place is nice," Shane said, grinning.

Maya flushed and said: "Hey Shanny. I guess what I meant is – it's nice to have your own place. I live with my parents. It's... got its challenges."

"Harry, Maya is here," Richard said in a stage whisper, causing Junaina to hastily suppress a snort and Shane to look away to hide his smile.

"Yes, I know," Harsha said, who had been stuck between whether to turn around awkwardly and look at Maya or wait for her to come around to the living room space so he could see her directly. He compromised and twisted his neck around and looked at her out of the corner of his eyes and said with as much dignity as he could muster: "Hi, Maya."

"Hey Harsha!" she said cheerfully and came up and ruffled his wavy hair. "Ready to teach us some Shakespeare, Professor?"

Harsha and Azhar followed her with their eyes as she crossed the room and sat cross-legged on the floor beside Shane. "What's all this literary wealth?" she asked, looking at the pile of books that Azhar had pushed onto the floor.

"Oh, that's just my little collection of books," Azhar said modestly, coming up the sofa and leaning forward to better look at Maya.

Shane and Junaina covered their mouths to (unsuccessfully) try and hide their amusement at Azhar's unctuous tone, and Richard's eyes narrowed as he looked from Azhar to Harsha, who was keeping his expression carefully blank.

Maya looked expectantly up at Harsha opposite her. "So. Where will we start, Harry? From the beginning? We are all in your hands, Professor!"

"Yes," Azhar said quickly. "You always need a Bong when it comes to all this Shakespeare stuff."

Maya's brows creased in annoyance at this intervention, but she bestowed her smile on Harsha once more. "Bengali or not, your knowledge is seriously impressive," she said, warmly. "The presentation you gave on war poetry was really cool, and made me go away and read up on Wilfred Owen!"

Harsha jumped a little and looked at her in surprise and gratitude for the unexpected endorsement. He cleared his throat and said: "Er... well... you know, I enjoyed giving it..."

"Right, right, you can have a cosy catch up later. When do we start? We have an exam *tomorrow*, buggers," Junaina cut in.

Harsha looked at Junaina in surprise. "Well obviously, I'm ready whenever you all are. Azhar wanted to wait till you'd rolled that joint."

"Oh, er... that doesn't matter ... filthy habit. Trying to quit anyway," Azhar said, hurriedly straightening up, his eyes still on Maya. All of them turned to stare at him, Junaina in horror and the others in amusement.

"What did I buy all this weed for then? You told me to bring extra for your weekend!" Junaina said plaintively.

Azhar made hushing noises towards her and then cleared his throat and said: "Well, you know, it's good for you. Medicinal and shit." He sheepishly sat down on the sofa next to Junaina and went quiet.

Harsha shook his head in patent disbelief. Then he pulled out his plastic folder and said. "Ok look, while Juni rolls that joint, you guys can read this summary I wrote of the first act. I made copies for all of you."

This was met with a wave of approval. There was a flurry of paper as Harsha handed out printouts to all present and they all settled down to read the sheets, Richard rubbing his eyes and trying to focus. Junaina absentmindedly took the sheet Harsha handed to her and used it to tip some of her tobacco into. Azhar stood again, unable to let go of his nervous energy, and paced up and down, sheet in hand.

There were perhaps three minutes of silence, disturbed only by the sound of rustling paper.

Then Azhar stopped dead by the door, looked up from his sheet and said: "Guys, who the fuck is this Anthony, anyway?"

A groan went around the room, though Shane convulsed into chuckles at the look of disbelief on Harsha's face.

"Ignorance is bliss," he volunteered.

Richard threw down his sheet dramatically. "This is too much," he said. "Harsha, why don't you just tell us the story?"

"Yeah! That's a good idea! Why didn't we think of that in the first place?" Azhar said, looking approvingly at Richard.

"That would actually be helpful, Harry, while I have my hands full," Junaina interjected, keeping her eyes on the thin sheet of paper she was now holding up.

Harsha looked at them open-mouthed for second and then at Shane and Maya opposite him, who both wore identical grins, and a look of resignation came over his face. "Fine, fine," he said, and removed his glasses to massage his eyes.

Azhar sat down on the arm of the sofa and everyone looked expectantly at Harsha.

"So, there's this guy called Anthony," he began wearily. "He's a Roman. From the part of the world that is now Italy. He's supposed to be in charge of the Roman empire," he looked around to make sure everyone was paying attention.

"Go on," Junaina said, impatiently.

"Instead, he's in Egypt, with Cleopatra."

"Why?" Richard asked, guilelessly.

"Because he's in love with her. He says here: 'Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the hallowed arches of the ranged empire fall.' That's an important line to remember - it sets the scene for the whole play. He's given up his responsibilities in Rome and his own ambition to pursue this woman. It's his fatal flaw. Shakespeare sets that out early in this play."

"Hubris, right?" Shane said, leaning forward, an uncharacteristically serious expression on his face as he concentrated on the matter at hand. "So, he doesn't care what happens in Rome, as long as he's with Cleopatra?" he asked.

"Well... in short, yes."

Azhar nodded in approval. "Yeah man, obviously babes come first. I follow the same policy. Hey, it's true ok, I admit it!" He added, speaking loudly above the groans that had broken out around him. "I admit it, ok? I love women, okay, and I always have!"

"Oh god, he's going to tell us about his first kiss again," Richard told Junaina gloomily.

Azhar turned to Richard dramatically. "Ok look, it's true ok, I was fourteen years old..."

"Eh, shut up, bugger," Junaina said, sharply. "I can't bear to hear this story again."

"Once bitten, twice shy, Juni?" Shane asked, giggling.

Harsha banged his hand on the coffee table to get everyone's attention. "In this scene he gets a message from Rome!"

"Who?" Azhar asked, blankly.

"Anthony, you bloody fool!"

"Oh ok."

"Hey guys," Richard said, looking up at the clock on the mantelpiece. "It's 8 o'clock and the tea shop is going to close!"

Junaina looked up in alarm. "Emergency *machan*, I didn't bring any cigarettes!"

"I have one pack," Shane said.

"Well, we better go get some just in case," Junaina replied.

There was a general movement to the door, though Harsha remained where he was, still looking into his copy of *Anthony and Cleopatra*.

Shane was about to stay but, noticing Maya, he quickly got up to

follow the others, leaving the two of them together. Maya hugged her legs and looked steadily at Harsha for a second, before picking up her sheet again and reading through it once more.

There was a silence in the room for a few minutes, save for the hum of the ceiling fan. After a while, Harsha looked up from his book and noticed Maya with a start, and hurriedly pushed his glasses further up his nose.

"You not going with the others?" he asked.

"I don't smoke. And I thought I would be a good friend and keep you company," Maya said, smiling.

There was a pause and then Harsha said: "So... er... what do you think of, you know." He waved his book feebly.

She shook her head. "Shakespeare isn't my thing. I prefer something more contemporary, more post-colonial," she said.

"Oh," he said, in surprise. "Such as?"

"I'm reading Chinua Achebe at the moment. Bleak. But also very elevating, in its own way."

Harsha leaned forward as though to drink in his companion's words and delicate features. "Maybe you could lend it to me after you're done with it?" he asked.

"Why not?" Maya laughed. "But first, let's get through this exam."

"I have a feeling you don't really need my help for this one."

"Maybe not, but it's nice to make some friends. You all seem like such a good bunch. Azhar is very funny, isn't he?"

"He is," Harsha said, neutrally.

"I like him," she said, not quite meeting his gaze.

He looked at her through narrowed eyes but didn't say anything. What could he say? Azhar was incredibly good-looking, even he could see that. And Harsha's own perception of himself was entirely dominated by the fact that he was overweight. The idea that he could be attractive to anyone at all was just not within the spectrum of his imagination. His lips twisted wryly as he reflected on all of this.

When Maya went back to reading his notes on *Anthony and Cleopatra*, he too turned to his text, though he tried to keep one eye on her and observe her without being too obviously creepy. He noticed

that while she was cheerful and full of laughter when speaking to them, her face fell quite dramatically when she was silent, and misery lines appeared on her forehead. There was *definitely* some mystery about this girl.

After a few moments, she looked up and met his eyes, smiled and said: "This is *good*, Harry. Really nicely written. Where did you go to school? In Kolkata, was it?"

Harsha was caught between embarrassment that she had caught him looking at her and at her compliment. But he hastily said: "Don't believe everything Azhar says. My father is Bengali, but I grew up here. My mother is from this part of the world, though she has some Bengali roots as well."

Maya nodded seriously. "I did wonder about your name - Harsha Devnath - it sounds South Indian."

"Well - it was originally Bengali. My father changed his name from Debnath to Devnath when he moved here to fit in better," Harsha looked up at Maya's quizzical expression and a ghost of a smile appeared on his face. "Yeah, I don't really understand it either. But it seems to have made him happy."

"Why did he come here? To Chennai, of all places?"

Harsha put down his book and looked at her thoughtfully. "To be honest, my father hasn't told me much about all that. I think ... I think he left Kolkata because he was from a lower caste and didn't get the jobs he wanted in academia. But he doesn't much like talking about that period in his life. Chennai is great, though! I grew up here and I love it. Kolkata is utter chaos."

"Is caste worse in Bengal than here? Strange!"

Harsha shook his head. "I don't think so, but when he changed his name to Devnath I think people couldn't figure out what his background was. And when they heard him speak they had him down as a Bengali rather than wondering about his caste."

Maya shook her head and smiled thoughtfully. "What a strange country we live in! You change one letter in a name and suddenly, your whole history is different. You go from one city to another - and suddenly your identity is viewed through a different prism!"

Harsha looked at her in surprise and dawning wonder. He had never thought about his father's frankly bizarre name change in that way, but in just minutes Maya had given him an insight into what the



old man's motivations might have been. Maya was just sitting there, a slightly thoughtful expression on her face, and as he watched her he felt an unfamiliar feeling in the pit of his stomach, a combination of fear and excitement that he would only grow to recognise many years later.

"How about you?" he asked.

"What about me?"

"Are you from here?"

"Yes, from a traditional Tamil family," she said, making it sound like the most boring thing in the world.

"Well - what's wrong with that? I'm half Tamil too."

"It's just not very exciting," she said flatly.

There was something in her voice that made Harsha realise that this wasn't a subject she wanted to pursue much further, so he dropped it.

"Are you enjoying university so far?" he asked instead.

A little bit of the sparkle returned to her eyes and she nodded: "Very much. I mean - I don't know if English literature is exactly what I want to do, but..."

"What *would* you want to do?"

Maya hugged her knees and looked up at the ceiling, a faraway look in her eyes. "If I could wave a magic wand ... I would probably go into social work. I'd really like to make a difference somehow, and... you know... I feel like there's a something inside me that is just spoiling for a fight of some sort! I just don't know what!"

He drank in her every word greedily. "You're a rebel without a cause," he said. "But listen - God help the world once you do find a cause! I think you would be a hell of a person to have fighting for any cause!"

She smiled a little sadly and said: "I'm not sure that will actually happen. In my family, it's all about getting married, being a good wife - I'm not entirely sure I will have a huge number of career options. This," she said, sweeping her arms to indicate the room with all its books, drinks cabinet and other joint-related paraphernalia, "is all just a little interlude before I get to the serious business of child-bearing." She laughed lightly, but he could hear the bitter undercurrent in her voice.

"I'm... I'm sorry," he said, not knowing what else to say.

She shook her head, as if to shake off her despondency, and then gave him a bright smile. He felt that jolt in the pit of his stomach again.

"But listen - I'm talking as though I'm about to die," she said. "I am loving being here in university, and I'm now enjoying getting to know you guys. Shane is amazing, and Junaina is a *sister*. I love her 'don't mess with me' vibe. And as for Richard..." At this her voice dropped to a whisper. "I was *so* upset when T.K. spoke to him like that. It was so... brutal. And so racist, obviously."

Harsha nodded gloomily. "I went to this school where everything was quite idealistic and we were encouraged to ask questions and whatnot. St Patrick's is great in its own way, a much better – a much more *authentic* cross-section of society – but I wasn't prepared for the kind of reality check it's been," he said, thoughtfully.

Maya untangled her limbs and stood up at this, shaking her head. "I don't know, Harry. I don't think we should accept racism as 'the reality of life'. We have to fight! Don't you think?"

Harsha's brow knitted together in a frown. "Is this the inner rebel inside you, Maya?"

She jumped at this and glared at him. "It's the normal person inside me, Harry! *Any* normal, decent person should feel this way, don't you think? Especially literature students? Otherwise what's the point of all this Shakespeare studying? 'When you prick us, do we not bleed'? Does that line mean nothing to you?"

"I... I... of course it does, *Merchant of Venice*, Act 3 Scene 1, but what *can* we do?" Harsha asked defensively, and then regarded her in alarm as she walked towards the door. "Where are you going?" he asked quickly, his head swivelling to follow her.

"Just looking for the toilet, idiot. Where is it?"

He pointed her in the direction of Azhar's bedroom, smiling with relief that he hadn't offended her.

She walked towards it and then turned at the door and said: "I don't know what we can do – but surely we can do *something*? We're not in school any more, Harry. We're adults now. Welcome to the real world!"

And with a wink at an open-mouthed Harsha, she disappeared into the bedroom.



### 3

St Patrick's University! The campus of India's (allegedly) finest institution for arts was a little haven in the midst of an urban jungle, a jewel in the dust, an injection of old-world Catholicism in the heart of Chennai's increasingly modern and crowded streets.

Outside its 100-acre campus in the northern part of the metropolis, cigarette shops, *udipi* restaurants and cycle repair stands jostled with each other in a cacophony of car horns and street hawkers' yells.

But within its walls, tranquillity reigned, ensured forcibly in some cases by its legion of priests, nuns and professors. Elaborate, manicured gardens fringed a 19th century chapel, lawns and trees lessened the severity of its massive, factory-like classroom buildings, and a little farm sat on one corner.

It was a hub of orderly activity, with students marching through its corridors and trying to get to their classrooms, accompanied by the occasional bark of an irate professor.

Proceeding in through the long arches of its massive buildings right up to the very northern edge of the campus, one arrived at the English department, slumbering perilously close to the canteen, with the smell of *samosas* and coffee wafting its way through somnolent classrooms.

In one of these rooms, about thirty boys and girls in their late

teens sat across a group of benches, some slumped across their desks, others chatting quietly among one another, one or two looking longingly out of the windows at the greenery on the west side and others still looking out at the great courtyard of the huge university building on the east.

At that moment, something approaching alertness ran through the room as a tall, neatly dressed man with a slightly balding pate strode in and peered ominously around at the group through a pair of round gold-rimmed spectacles.

He slammed a huge stack of papers on the teacher's desk at the front of the classroom, sending a cloud of chalk dust floating around his head like a dusty halo, before giving his now-attentive audience a final piercing stare.

Those who were slumped sat up as the professor walked in front of the desk and leaned nonchalantly against it, flicking a mote of chalk dust from his cuffs with practiced *élan*. He paused for a moment, glaring indiscriminately at all the students in front of him, before saying without preamble: "Yesterday, I was correcting one answer paper, and I did not know whether to *laugh* or to *cry*."

Before he could proceed, a rotund student appeared at the classroom entrance, panting, and stuttered out breathlessly: "Excuse me ... Professor D'Souza, really ... sorry ... late ... can I come in?"

Professor D'Souza leaned back to look at the latecomer, disdain dripping from his glance. "Hmm..." he uttered finally. "For fifteen years I have been teaching here and never once have I permitted anyone to enter my classroom late. Tell me why I should make an exception in your case?"

The boy looked gormlessly at the professor, and, recovering his breath, managed to stammer out: "Sir, Father Edward called me..."

"Father Edward may have called you, or the Pope may have called you, I couldn't care less," Professor D'Souza cut in sharply, and then turned to the classroom, not bothering to watch the latecomer as he wandered off disconsolately.

"As I was saying," D'Souza continued, refocusing his merciless gaze on the students, "I was correcting one paper yesterday, and I did not know whether to laugh or to cry. Some foolish person has not bothered even to glance at the prescribed poems, and has listened imperfectly in class, and as a result, one of the greatest poets in English

Literature would have turned in his grave."

He paused dramatically, his eyes sweeping the room. Between gritted teeth, he delivered the *dénouement*: "This person has referred to Milton's most evocative sonnet, 'On his Blindness', as 'Honest Blindness' – not once, but *six times*, throughout an extremely erroneous and rambling answer!"

A great shout of laughter went across the classroom. "Quiet! Be quiet!" D'Souza shouted, though Harsha noticed that the man's lips had twitched slightly before he quickly controlled it.

As the class fell silent, D'Souza said: "Anyway, be that as it may, we will deal with the metaphysical poets today, and I'll give you your answer papers at the end of class." He fixed them with his iron glare again. "If I give them to you now, you'll be chattering like schoolgirls until the break!"

He turned around, picked up a piece of chalk, walked up to the blackboard and turned again with an elaborate sweep of his feet.

"Right, can anyone name one of the metaphysical poets?"

A palpable silence spread across the classroom.

"Anyone?" D'Souza asked again, a frown descending upon his brow once again as he turned to look across the rows of students.

"John Donne," someone volunteered from the left.

D'Souza took a deep breath and said: "I meant any poet OTHER than the one whose poem I asked you to bring to class today!"

Someone mumbled something in the first row.

"What?" D'Souza thundered, turning around fully. "Wordsworth? WORDSWORTH?"

A few sniggers broke out, though they vanished quickly in the face of D'Souza's thunderous expression.

He scanned the classroom and then his gaze rested on Harsha and paused there.

"Andrew Marvell," Harsha said, dutifully.

"Thank you," D'Souza said. "For the sake of my own blood pressure, I won't ask any more questions. Alright, all of you take out a copy of John Donne's *The Flea*."

He turned and again and paced up and down in front of the first row of desks. "Right, does everyone have a copy? You, young lady. Yes, you. Do you have a copy?" he asked, pointing at Junaina, whose desk

was noticeably empty.

Junaina looked either side of her before standing up in a shifty manner. "Sir, we don't have a copy of the poem," she said finally.

"We? What is this 'we'? What are you, some sort of gang leader? Sit down! You," an irate D'Souza pointed to Richard, who was sitting next to Junaina. "Why don't you have a copy?"

Richard stood up awkwardly. "Sir, the photocopy machine in the library is not working," he said.

D'Souza's eyes narrowed into slits. "I see," he said, and returned to the front of the class. "Let me introduce to you all to a God-given gift that each one of us has. It is called a hand. And do you see that wondrous implement there on your desk? It is called a pen. And that magical recording object there, it's called a notebook. Using all of these in conjunction, you can actually copy down a 14-line poem and bring it to class. Or am I asking too much of you? Am I being an inhuman taskmaster?" he roared, before looking around, breathing heavily.

"Right," he continued finally. "I'm leaving now, I'm in no mood, and I need a cup of tea to restore my tissues after the strain of teaching this class. Collect your papers from the desk. Mr Devnath! A word, please."

Harsha started in his place on the bench and looked around in surprise at his classmates.

"Coming, sir!" he called out to the professor, who had already left the classroom and was standing by the railing of the corridor, looking out onto the great courtyard.

Junaina stood up and said, as she headed towards the front of the classroom: "Don't look so nervous, bugger. Probably to congratulate you on your perfect exam, or something."

"Yes, Harry," Richard said, amusement in his voice. "Probably the first person to get 110 out of 100 in the history of St. Paddy's."

Harsha stood up nervously and slouched away towards the door. A buzz of conversation had already started up as the class took D'Souza's exit cheerfully in its stride. A mad scramble for the exam papers had begun by the teacher's desk, with sheets scattering everywhere.

"I just want to pass! These stupid tests count towards your final mark, for some reason!" Harsha heard one fellow say to a friend, who shook her head in disapproval at this display of blatant meritocracy.

"Man, I can't even remember what I wrote! Phew! 63%, not too bad!" said another, tearing his exam paper in his excitement. Junaina elbowed him aside and starting ruffling through the papers to find her own answer sheet and that of her friends.

Shane joined her.

"The moment of judgement," he said, dimpling. Junaina snorted and continued rifling through the papers.

"EL44, that's Harsha, EL22 - Azhar... and Ricky?"

"EL07," Shane said.

Between them they collected all the relevant papers and went back to their little section of the classroom at the back.

Azhar had his feet up on the desk and was looking pensively out of the window, looking more like a movie star than ever. Richard was hunched forward on the bench behind Azhar, sharpening a pencil with great concentration, bits of pencil shaving scattering all over the floor. Junaina dumped their collective papers down on a table and was about to slide into her place beside Azhar when something caught her eye, and she picked up one of the answer papers.

"*Tintin*? What's this?"

Azhar snapped out of his reverie and leaned forward towards her. "Oy, give me that!"

"Guys, check this out," Junaina said, leaning out of his reach. Clearing her throat, she read out: "'Alexander Selkirk reminds me of Robinson Crusoe, they were both very adventurous people. In that way, he also reminds me of Tintin, the detective, with a dog.'" Shane and Richard burst into laughter, as did one or two other classmates within earshot.

"Whose paper is that?" Shane asked.

"Guess who!"

They all looked around at a reddening Azhar.

"Fuck off, guys, who gives a shit about this Alexander Sel-whatever."

Shane peeped over Junaina's shoulder. "Not bad dude, you got 1 out of 10 for this answer."

"Oh, shut up," Azhar said, grabbing hold of his answer paper and crumpling it.

"Tintin!" Richard said, collapsing into a fresh paroxysm of



laughter and clutching the edge of his bench.

"What you laughing at, bugger," Junaina said, pushing back a strand of hair that had fallen in front of her face and grabbing another paper. "Guess who wrote 'Honest Blindness'?"

A fresh wave of laughter went through their group, though Shane put his arm around Richard. "Ricky's talents lie elsewhere, isn't that right? He's singing and playing guitar at the culturals," he said, looking around a little proudly.

"Seriously?" Junaina asked, looking at Richard with fresh respect. "You're always such a quiet bugger here - can't imagine you playing in front of a crowd! All the chicks go wild for that stuff."

"Well," Richard said, modestly. "You know, I can play a bit..."

"Play a bit? He's seriously good! The only chance the English department has of actually winning something," Shane said, emphatically.

Junaina turned around in her bench, folding one leg up on her seat and looked curiously at Richard. "You seem like such a shy guy. How do you have the balls to get up in front of people and sing? I would love to be able to do that!"

Richard shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know... It just feels natural. Also, I've been playing guitar since I was six. It just feels natural."

"Oy, you have Maya's paper there? Said I'd pick it up for her," Azhar interjected, breaking unceremoniously into this conversation and pawing at the answer papers in Junaina's hand.

Shane looked at him in annoyance and Junaina slapped his hands away. "Get your hands off me!" she barked.

"What the... as though I would even *want* to touch you!"

Shane rested his arms and his head down on the bench in front of him, stretching out, and winked at Richard and Junaina before asking Azhar: "You going over to give her the paper tonight?"

"She's coming over," Azhar said, glancing at the paper in front of him. "Bloody hell, 82%! How does she manage... Anyway."

"And how late will she be staying, Azhar bhai?"

Azhar looked up at that and grinned. "Well, we both need to study *hard* these days, you know?" he said, and they all groaned at his emphasis on the word 'hard', though Shane glanced quickly at

Harsha, who had just come up at that moment.

"But listen," Azhar said, undeterred by the irritation of his fellow classmates. "Harry, you are helping me with my essay, right? I'm screwed if you don't help me, *machan!* I don't even know what that Sentex shit is."

"Syntax," Shane said, dimpling.

"Whatever! And it's that Joy fellow – the opposite of his name – just waiting for a chance to screw me over. You have to help, Harry!" Azhar said, a panicked edge to his voice.

"Of course I will. Calm down," Harsha said, soothingly, swinging into the bench next to Richard, patting Azhar's shoulder in front of him.

"What did D'Souza want, anyway?" Junaina asked, looking curiously at Azhar, and handing his answer paper over to him.

Harsha glanced at the paper in front of him and frowned slightly. Absentmindedly, he said: "He wants to me to edit the student newspaper – St Patrick's Express or whatever it's called."

There was a brief (relative) silence and then Shane said: "What did you say?"

"I said he wants me to edit..."

"I heard that, idiot. What did you say to *him?*"

"Well ... I didn't want to, I told him I wanted to focus on my exams, but..."

To everyone else's annoyance, Harsha went silent and started reading his answer paper.

"But what, you fool?" Junaina asked and Richard pulled the paper away from Harsha's hands.

He looked up at them, a little startled, and then said: "Oh – but he basically kind of begged me to do it."

"Beg? D'Souza?"

"Maybe I'm exaggerating, but he basically said that he wanted someone whom he could trust and who would do a good job of it. Said that the newspaper had become a bit of a joke and was starting to reflect badly on the English department."

They looked at him in awe.

"Dude, that's a real honour, man! Plus, you'll get extra credit, I guess?"

Harsha nodded. Azhar spun around at the idea of extra credit and said: "Can I do anything for this, Harry? Photographer maybe?"

"You can be on the comics page. As the subject," Junaina said, sardonically.

"Anyway, I didn't say yes for the credit," Harsha said quietly.

Shane perked up at this and said: "You didn't? Why then?"

Harsha licked his lips and said: "I guess I thought I could use this in some way to help deal with... you know... T.K. And racism on the campus. By doing some articles on it or something."

His voice faded to nothing as he looked up and saw the sceptical expression on his classmates' faces.

"Eh! You're dreaming if you think these buggers will let you publish anything like that!"

"Harry – you might get kicked out! It's madness!"

"This isn't an adventure story, Harry," Azhar said, shaking his head. "You're not a bloody knight or something."

"Or Tintin," Shane said, giving Junaina a sly nudge and nodding his head towards Azhar.

Harsha looked around at all of them, a little crestfallen, and then said: "Well then, maybe I can do an article about all the students who come here from... you know... Mizoram and ... you know, the North East in general. There's quite a few Tibetans here as well. A colour piece on what it's like for them to move to Chennai to study?"

"All the chinks, you mean?"

"Don't call them *chinks*, Azhar – you of all people should... Ricky, what do you think? It might help people understand where you guys are coming from ... and the challenges you face ... and that kind of thing," Harsha finished, pushing his glasses up to blink at Richard.

But Richard showed no signs that he was interested in this subject. Instead, he was staring at Harsha's answer paper in shock.

"Oh my god," he said finally. "Ninety six percent!"

This new information superseded the discussion about the student newspaper, and all of them turned to look at Harsha with awed respect.

"Holy shit," Junaina said, finally.

"I'm not sure if marks are the point, really," Harsha said, weakly.

"But *ninety six percent!*"

"Is that even possible?"

"Bugger, you should be teaching us, not these clowns!"

"D'Souza's a good teacher," Harsha said, mildly.

"Well, apart from him. What about Joy? And T.K.? Completely hopeless!" Richard said, slamming the paper down on the bench in disbelief.

"Anyway, Harsha will be teaching me Sentex or Sensex or whatever that shit is, that's for sure!" Azhar declared and stood up. "Alright guys, I'm going for a coffee and a smoke. Anyone else coming?"

There was a scrambling of benches as the group got ready to take a break from a hard morning's work.

"Juni, you coming or what?"

Junaina shook her head. "No, can't be bothered to go all the way to the teashop."

"Shane? Harry? A smoke to celebrate your ninety six percent, dude?" Azhar asked, flippantly.

Shane dimpled and said: "Be careful, Azhar *bhai*! Be careful how you address a valued member of the fourth estate – the new editor of the St Patrick's Express!"

"Oh, shut up," the valued member said. "Yes, I'll come, Azhar."

## 4

It was around this time that the concept of the café first came to Chennai. Naysayers – who made up most of the city's population – were bewildered by the idea that anyone would pay 30 rupees for a cup of coffee when they could get a much better brew at the local *udipi* restaurant for 8 rupees or less.

But the teenagers got it. Starved of places to meet and socialise in a conservative town where pubs and bars were a rarity and parental permission to visit such places even more scarce, they went to these strange new places in droves, chatting with casual acquaintances they met there and gawking at people known and unknown.

They went to coffee shops to see, and to be seen.

By general consensus, the best of these was Amethyst, a sprawling establishment in an old colonial era building in the heart of town with tables strewn in air-conditioned spaces inside the building and in the open air on its broad verandah and across its garden.

On one pleasant afternoon in January (winter was an unknown concept in Chennai) Azhar and Harsha sat under a tall palm tree in Amethyst's garden, hunched over a pile of notebooks and reference books. Empty coffee cups and crumb-laden plates were pushed to one corner of the marble surface of their table, and they were both writing steadily in their books. Then Azhar rubbed his eyes, dropped his pen and looked down gormlessly at the sheet in front of him.

"Dude, I literally can't do any more. Who cares about this jesting pilot? Literally no one!"

Harsha looked up wearily and said: "It's not a pilot, Azhar, it's Pilate. A Roman emperor! I beg you not to write about pilots or planes in your exam!"

He then seemed to shake off his air of exasperation and looked up at his friend, saying a little sadly: "Anyway, we're already into our second semester. Time is flying by! Before you know it, no more Pilates, jesting or otherwise! College will be over!"

"Thank fuck for that," Azhar said with frankness. He stifled a yawn and then said. "What's the time, anyway?"

Harsha consulted his watch – a glitzy (and fake) Swatch – and said: "Just turned four. Maybe we should..." He looked up in alarm as Azhar stood up hurriedly, brushing the crumbs off his Tommy Hilfiger t-shirt and torn jeans.

"Why didn't you say something, you fool? Maya will be here any minute!"

"So?" Harsha asked, bewildered.

"So I have to... God Harsha... what the hell..." Azhar walked distractedly up and down the space between his table and the next, where a trio of girls eyed him up from over their cold coffees.

Knowing his friend well, Harsha waited. Azhar eventually stopped his pacing and said: "Do you have any mints?"

"No."

"Fuck."

"Azhar," Harsha said as soothingly as he could. "What's the problem?"

Azhar turned an agonised face towards him. "I told her I quit smoking weed!"

"Ah."

It had been barely five minutes since Azhar had last lit up a spliff in one corner of the garden, despite Harsha's protests that it may not be conducive to studying.

Harsha watched Azhar pace up and down and then said: "Come on *machan*, nothing can be done now, just sit down and relax! Let's order more coffee."

After Azhar rejoined him at the table, Harsha looked curiously at

his friend. He knew Azhar as a happy-go-lucky person who rarely took anything seriously. To see him fretting and worrying over a girl was most unusual. Especially when he sometimes behaved in a way that no boyfriend should.

"So it's going well with Maya, then? You saw her over the Christmas break, didn't you?" he asked.

"What? Yeah, good. I did. Haven't met her parents or anything yet. Yeah, it's going really well. She is so special, Harsha! An absolute jewel! I am so lucky to have someone like her!"

Harsha looked at Azhar's fervent expression and felt something go a bit cold inside. He dropped his pen on the table as well and said, sarcastically: "You sure behave like that when you're out in town without her."

Azhar looked up at him, something like panic entering his eyes. "Harry - you... you... can't tell her about that! It was just the one time..."

"Come on, Azhar, I've personally been there at least twice when you..."

"Ok ok! It was more than once, but I just can't help it, man! I love women, and..."

"Oh god, not this!" Harsha groaned, pushing himself away from the table slightly, feeling a genuine sense of disgust washing over him.

"I was just fourteen years old when..."

"Oh, shut up."

Azhar sighed and leaned back on his chair, sweeping his hair with his hands. Then he stood up decisively.

"Ok, I'm going to the toilet," he said. "Might as well at least wash my face even if my breath smells of weed."

Harsha shook his head and muttered exasperatedly to himself as his friend made his way towards the toilet by the side of the building. One of the girls from the next table looked up at him in a calculating manner and smiled slightly before turning away.

Harsha reflected briefly on a time when a girl like that wouldn't even have given him a second glance, and returned to his own textbooks. He read for perhaps five minutes before giving up and pushing his textbooks away from him. Much as he pushed Azhar on it, this was his least favourite literary form; why on earth did they

have to study essays on truth and whatnot? It was, in his opinion, a dead form of art. Literary criticism, yes, but essays...

This line of thought was rudely interrupted when a heavy textbook dropped with a thud right in front of him. Startled, he looked up to see Maya standing in front of him with a broad smile and warm affection in those large, deep brown eyes that he knew so well.

"Maya!" he said, slightly breathlessly. "It's good to see you."

She laughed and said: "Head in the clouds again, Harry?"

"Guilty as charged," he said, standing up and giving her a brief hug. She kissed him on the cheek affectionately and sat down. The girls at the next table looked over, checking out Maya's simple but elegant *salwar kameez*, which formed a sharp contrast to their jeans and stringy tops.

"It's been a million years; how are you?"

"Extremely well, thank you Maya," Harsha said, trying to control his excitement and pleasure at seeing her again. "We missed you terribly during your extended break. So delighted to have you back."

"You sound like a politician," she said, pouting, as she pulled up a chair and sat down, surveying the chaos of books and cutlery in front of her in slight horror.

"*Dei*, what are you happily kissing my girlfriend for?" Azhar's good-natured voice cut into their conversation, as the man himself walked up to the table, a genial grin on his face.

Maya stood, her eyes lighting up, and she leaned forward to kiss her boyfriend, but then recoiled.

"You've been smoking weed again!" she said, her good-natured expression fading.

"Me? Me???" Azhar said indignantly, his hands pointing dramatically to his chest and his body bent forward in a tremendous display of outrage.

"Oh, shut up," Maya said, wearily, and turned to Harsha instead: "I haven't seen you for just one month, and look at you! You look completely different!"

"Oh, I've started wearing contact lenses."

"Hmm... and where's your friend?"

"What friend?" Harsha asked, genuinely bewildered.

"This one!" she said, poking his stomach.



"Oh!" Harsha said, reddening and rubbing his now vastly-reduced paunch.

"Yeah, look at him now!" Azhar declared with paternal pride, as he pulled up the chair and sat heavily down on it, all vestiges of sleep having vanished from his face. "Lost weight, no more glasses. Ran into him in Bike & Barrels the other day with these two German girls! And what about that air hostess at Pasha!"

"Azhar! Stop it. The Germans were just here for a conference with my father's school, my father asked me to take them out for a drink..."

"And the air hostess?"

"Well... she... yes, I guess it was a date, but you..."

"Anyway," Azhar cut in quickly, giving Harsha a meaningful look that made Maya's fine brows contract with suspicion. "How about something to eat? These bloody waiters are impossible to find. I'll go get some chilli cheese toast? And coffee for everyone?"

He stood up hurriedly, without waiting for a response, and scuttled off towards the main building, though he turned briefly, his trademark grin back on his face and said to Harsha: "Keep your hands off her, bitch!"

Harsha snorted and then settled his face into a neutral expression. He looked up, giving Maya a bland smile. She looked a little sadly back at him and then shook herself, saying: "But you are looking great. Honestly. Where did all the fat go?"

"Diet and exercise, no mystery there! Azhar personally decided to act as my fitness mentor, took me along to his gym and everything. As for diet – I've always found it easier to keep to it when I'm happy. And to be fair to these clowns – Ricky, Azhar, Shane, Juni – I really do love them to death," Harsha said, causing a genuine smile to replace the strained one on Maya's face.

"And me, I hope?" Maya said, teasingly.

"Oh, I've always loved you," Harsha said without thinking, and then turned scarlet. "I mean... as ... you know ... a friend..."

She laughed and patted his hand. "I know," she said.

Harsha looked down at the text of his Francis Bacon essays and tried to assess why Maya had such an impact on him. What was so special about her? She was pretty, yes, but surely not unique in that. She was compassionate and sweet, yes, but again – how unique was

that?

With a jolt, he realised that he liked Maya because she had seen through his fat exterior and had seen the real person beneath. She had always been lovely to him from the beginning, and not in a pitying way - in a genuine way, as though they were equals in every respect.

Her behaviour to him hadn't changed a jot just because he had lost weight and was wearing nice clothes (chosen by Azhar and Richard), whereas almost everyone else, even his family, was talking to him a little differently since his physical transformation. Was it pathetic that he liked her because she liked him? Probably, he concluded gloomily. It also helped that he saw her as his intellectual equal, which was not really how he saw the rest of his friends, much as he loved them. Was this an unworthy thought?

"Oy, head in the clouds again!" she declared, breaking into his reverie.

"Sorry! Too much Francis Bacon."

"That's enough to drive anyone mad. But tell me, Harry," she said, seriously, pulling out her bag. "What new ideas did you have for the newsletter? I've got a few."

Harsha shook his head to clear his thoughts, and said: "Well, our first edition of St Patrick's Express was fun - I really enjoyed the "Communities" series. Your Tibetan piece was great and Shane's bit on Anglo-Indians was *brilliant*. Between us, I hadn't really expected him to come up with..."

"That's because you're an unbearable snob!" Maya laughed.

Harsha looked at her with some concern, but grinned as he saw she was only joking. "The problem is that I'm not sure very many people actually read it," he said, seriously. "So I do wonder what the point was."

She smiled and said: "That's not true, Harry. Lots of people read it. I got loads of comments from the Tibetans; you've become a kind of cult hero in the North East! Didn't Richard's father even write to you to invite you to go and see his vineyard in Mizoram?"

Harsha nodded, picking up the crumbs of some cake with one finger and running it between his forefinger and thumb. "Indian wine! Can't imagine that catching on. But who knows, maybe one day. But I guess in terms of making a difference..."

She sighed and said: "I guess I'm also disappointed that it hasn't

changed anything with our professors. T.K. especially. He is still an obnoxious bastard – misogynist, racist, just an unpleasant person.”

Harsha shrugged. “I guess a touchy-feely piece about how amazing everyone is doesn’t really reach people like him. We did our best, anyway.”

“That’s not good enough, Harry. We can’t just shrug our shoulders and say ‘we did our best’. Maybe we need something more *direct*.”

“I don’t think it’s fair to... hang on – what do you mean more direct? Are you going to throw eggs at T.K. on the street? Start a riot?”

Maya laughed. “I did consider both!” she said teasingly. “But honestly, I don’t know if that’s the answer. I think we need to tackle the racism thing directly. We need to write about the real experiences of racism.”

“Yes, *of course* we do, Maya, but we have to do it in a way that is iron clad. That’s the difficulty. It can’t just be accusations against...”

“Why *not*, Harry?”

“Because he can just deny it, and...”

“Deny what hundreds of students have heard multiple times?”

“Yes! He’s more powerful than the students, he’s next in line for the position of Head of Department, and he can make life miserable for students, so they don’t want to go on the record.”

“Why does that *matter*, Harry?”

“Because it does!”

“Hey, hang on, why are you getting so angry? I’m just ...”

“I *know*.” Harsha turned away in exasperation, looking out at the palm-fringed garden and trying to calm himself. Why *was* he so angry? He couldn’t figure it out, but Maya was pushing him and he was not enjoying it. T.K. had power over them, and he hated it.

A hand landed on his hand. “I’m sorry, Harsha,” Maya said, and he turned to see her looking at him penitently. “I know we are doing so much good work. I didn’t mean to suggest that we aren’t! Talking to those Tibetans. It... it made me cry, I have to be honest.”

Harsha smiled and said: “Well, you did a great job.”

She patted his hand and then withdrew it and they sat in silence for a couple of minutes.

Then, a playful look came over Maya’s face. She crossed her legs on her chair and said: “So tell me about this air hostess!”

"Oh God!" Harsha said, reddening slightly, and looking around to see if anyone was listening in. There was only the usual pleasant hubbub of conversation and clinking of cutlery, so he said: "It was just a girl I met at the gym. From a village in Punjab, very innocent – or so I thought – and I took her out for a drink."

"And?" Maya prompted, moving her chair forward and drinking it in.

"And nothing! We went out and then that was it!"

"Ah come on! I don't blame Azhar for not believing this rubbish! Surely you at least..."

Harsha laughed self-consciously and said: "I did maybe try and kiss her on the dance floor, but she said – and I quote: 'Only my future husband may kiss me!' and she wagged her finger at me. In the middle of all the dancers! It was mortifying!"

Maya laughed loud and long, and the three girls at the next table looked over with interest, as did the waiter who was taking their payment, while a couple of middle-aged ladies glared at both of them in annoyance. Harsha grinned at Maya's enjoyment of this story and stirred the dregs of his coffee absentmindedly.

"Punjabi or not, I know exactly the type! I went to school with so many of them," Maya said, still chortling. "But you said she turned out not to be so innocent in the end?"

"Oh, nothing to do with me!" Harsha said, laughing. "She just ..." He paused for a second, looked up to see Azhar heading their way with a tray of drinks and food and started clearing the table.

"She just what?" Maya asked, and Harsha jumped at the sharpness in her voice. He looked up to see her eyes narrowed and her smile gone.

"She just ended up making out with someone else in the bar," he said, soothingly. Her eyes flickered and she looked a little sheepish as Azhar planted his plate on the table with the air of a knight bringing back the holy grail. "Coffee, cake and chilli cheese toast!" he declared with relish.

"Thank you, baby," Maya said and this time she did reward him with a kiss.

"What were you guys talking about?" Azhar asked, depositing himself on his chair.

"Oh, just Harry's air hostess," Maya said lightly, watching his reaction.

"Oh yeah!" Azhar said, reminiscently. "She was one alright! She ... er..." He looked up, caught Maya's expression and went silent. "Anyway, you guys talking about your newsletter? Are you going to do us all a favour and destroy T.K.'s rep, Harry?"

Harsha laughed. "Don't you start as well! I've just been getting an earful from Maya."

"Oh buddy, don't worry. I have no clue why you waste your time with this newsletter bullshit," Azhar said dismissively.

"It's not bullshit, Azhar!" Maya said hotly, but Harsha laughed and laughed.

"Never change, Azhar. Never change, buddy," he said, picking up a slice of chilli cheese toast.

## 5

In the bowels of St Patrick's, just opposite the ancient library with its dusty 19<sup>th</sup> century volumes and creaking shelves, was the old printing press where the university printed all its literature – the many exam papers, pamphlets and, of course, the student newsletter.

Next to it, in one of the many identical rooms, left deliberately dark to lower the temperature, were the offices of St Patrick's Express.

Its current chief editor sat gloomily staring at a sheet of paper that represented Page 3 of the tome and wondered bitterly for the hundredth time why he had agreed to edit the paper. An entire year running this clown show, he thought to himself, staring around at the room.

"Harsha?" the woman opposite him timidly asked again.

"Yes, er... Christina... I can see what you want to do here," Harsha lied, looking briefly at the mousy woman sitting opposite him. "But you need to bring out the *newsy* element of the story, do you understand?"

Christina focused her large eyes first on him and then on the sheet in his hand and then shook her head to signify that she didn't.

Harsha could have just changed the copy himself, but he needed Christina on board, particularly as his deputy editor seemed to have gone missing at this crucial time – the week before publication.

"You see, Christina... the story I asked you to cover was about

how a woman gave birth in the bus stop outside St Patrick's. You see? What do you think the *newsy* element is?"

Christina continued to stare at him so he sighed and held up the sheet, which bore the headline: 'PREGNANT WOMAN GIVES BIRTH TO BABY' and said: "Do you see what you've written here as the headline? That's *not* news, do you see? People give birth every day. And all these details about her girl's name and so on, very nice, but you only mention the bus stop in the fourth paragraph. Do you see what I'm trying to say?"

Understanding slowly seemed to dawn on Christina's face, and she bobbed her head furiously. "You want me to write more about the fact she gave birth in the bus stop?"

"By George, she's got it," Harsha muttered to himself.

"Who is George?"

"Just go and do it, Christina!" Harsha snapped, and watched her scuttle away towards her post before turning to the remaining sheets at his elbow.

It was amazing how much respect being the editor of this newspaper had garnered for him. But honestly, he would have preferred the people around him to have strong opinions so that there was a bit of creative tension. God knows, he even wished for a bit of back chat and rudeness, if only to relieve the monotony.

"Hey, numbnuts," a voice sailed out towards him. He looked up to see Junaina waltzing into the room, flanked on either side by Shane and Richard, both wearing sunglasses and looking like affable bodyguards. Junaina plonked herself onto the chair in front of his desk and looked appreciatively around, while Shane sat on the edge of the desk and dimpled at Harsha. Richard came to his side, depositing his backpack onto the desk, and looked through the sheets by Harsha's elbow with interest.

"The editor hard at work," Shane declared.

"What choice do I have when half of my editorial staff has buggered off somewhere?" Harsha asked bitterly. "Where the hell have you been, Shanny?"

"Out on the beat!" Shane said, his grin widening, much to Harsha's irritation. "You don't get news in the newsroom, my friend!"

"Nice set-up you got here, Harry," Junaina said, ignoring this exchange. "No wonder you're getting all those top marks. Good little

office, some young things to order around. And you get some credit for extra-curricular at the end of the year?"

"Yes, I do," Harsha said, shortly. He looked up at Richard beside him and asked: "How's it going, Ricky?"

"Good! Good! You wrote this, Harry?" Richard asked, looking earnestly at Harsha from over a sheet of his newspaper proofs. "It's really good, *machan*."

Harsha grinned to hear Tamil slang in Richard's broad Mizorami accent, the stress sliding from his face. It was impossible to stay annoyed when Richard was around.

"What are you guys doing for your credit?" he asked. It was a requirement at St Patrick's to work on a project that benefited the university or the wider community in some way in order to pass your end-of-year exams.

"Myself and Ricky are teaching English at the corporation school just round the corner," Junaina said casually, picking up a framed photo and inspecting it with interest. "Who is this babe?"

"My sister, idiot," Harsha said, leaning forward and grabbing the frame from her. "You're teaching kids? Good God."

"Talk about childhood trauma," Shane said, chuckling.

Junaina took Harsha's newspaper proofs from Ricky, glanced at them and said in an absent voice: "I just sing little songs to them and Ricky plays the guitar. Little buggers soak it up."

"Not bad, guys!" Harsha said, genuinely impressed.

Richard nodded his head as he straightened up and started rummaging through his bag for something. "It's quite good! They like the guitar a lot, they all come running up to touch it and try to play it. Luckily it's not my guitar - it belongs to Francis," he finished, with his trademark cheeky grin. He pulled out a small bottle with some pink liquid in it and unscrewed the cap. Harsha had just enough time to read the word "Corex" on its cover before Richard swigged its entire contents in one go.

"Why the hell are you drinking cough syrup, Ricky?" he asked, after a pause.

Richard clasped his hands together and held them in front of his shirt, looking for all the world like a naughty schoolboy, and said: "Because I've run out of 'E'."



"E?"

"Ecstasy, fool," Junaina said, without looking up from the article she was reading.

"You taking ecstasy now, Ricky? Isn't weed enough?"

Richard shuffled his feet and looked down at the floor. "Ecstasy and a cup of hot tea. It's quite nice!" he muttered sheepishly.

Harsha and Shane glanced at each other, and Harsha saw the concern he was feeling mirrored in his fellow journalist's eyes.

He opened his mouth to say something more, but Junaina interrupted him.

"So you're going ahead with this racism thing, then?" she asked, as her eyes made their way through the sheet in her hand.

"You bet we are. We finally came up with a way to write the story, thanks to Shanny here," Harsha said, nodding towards Shane. "We did a survey of students on whether or not they had experienced racism in St Patrick's, and the results were even more shocking than I'd expected. But the data gave us the hook we needed to write the story, and we were able to get loads of quotes and individual examples as a result."

Junaina's eyes travelled slowly over the entire page. Then she said: "I notice that this is all about students being racist to other students. What about the profs? What about fucking T.K.?"

Harsha sighed, swivelled slightly in his chair and said: "We don't have any people who are willing to go on the record when it comes to professors. Unless you're willing to put your name to it, Juni? Tell us about everything you've heard in the classroom?"

Junaina looked up, startled, and met Harsha's steady gaze. Then she conceded: "Good point."

Harsha's lips twisted sardonically for a second, and then he said: "But hopefully this article – it's going to go on the front page – will send out a bit of a warning signal to the professors and put them on their guard. And if it doesn't, there's always next year, if I can bear to do this any longer. But tell me – to what do I owe this great pleasure?"

"We're going over to St Mary's College for their cultural, representing the English department," Richard said, a little too brightly for Harsha's liking, suggesting that the cough syrup had given him the kick he had been seeking. "And we need you there,

Harsha! Someone who can actually answer questions on English literature!"

"What a pity you don't have any other students of English literature to choose from," Harsha said, with heavy sarcasm.

"Oy! Don't be a fucking snob," Junaina said sharply. "Just come and we'll have a blast."

"Azhar is coming, but I suspect he'll be a bit distracted," Shane smiled.

Junaina snorted, dropping the sheet onto the desk. "Put Azhar in a women's college, and literally any shit could happen. Terrible idea to even allow him inside."

"I think Maya is more than capable of keeping him on the straight and narrow," Harsha said, smiling.

Junaina and Shane glanced at each other and then looked back at Harsha seriously.

"You haven't heard?"

"Heard what?"

Shane took a deep breath and then said: "They broke up."

Harsha looked from one to another, his heart beating faster. "You... you serious? For real?"

"For real," Junaina said, soberly. "He was cheating on her..."

"Of course..."

"... And I guess she finally got sick of pretending that he wasn't."

Shane said: "Also, she was pushing him about marriage, and honestly, imagine *Azhar* married at this age?"

"That doesn't excuse the fact that he couldn't keep his dick in his pants," Junaina said hotly.

Harsha glanced over at Christina, who was watching and listening to this whole exchange wide-eyed, and then said in a placatory manner: "Of course it doesn't, Juni. It was just the wrong relationship at the wrong time."

Junaina shook her head in disgust. "You men will always band together and make excuses for each other."

Shane grinned, looked at Harsha and cocked his head towards Junaina, saying: "Someone's turned all sanctimonious all of a sudden, eh?"

"I have *not*," Junaina said, turning red at this terrible accusation.

Harsha smiled weakly, tuned out their conversation and looked down at the sheets of paper on his desk that he had been dealing with on his own, without his able deputy. Her absence was better explained now. He felt a range of conflicting emotions – sadness that her relationship with Azhar had ended, worry for what would happen to their circle of friends, and of course, hope.

“So – are you coming? We’re planning to go over at 4pm,” Shane asked, intruding into his thoughts.

“Oh? If I get done here by then, I’ll come. We have just a week until publication,” Harsha said. “Unless you’re planning to help me edit this?”

“Ok then, better leave the great newspaper editor to his work!” Shane declared, grinning at Richard and getting to his feet.

“Nice way to get your credit,” Junaina said casually, swinging herself to her feet.

“Says the person singing lullabies to a bunch of brats,” Harsha said, smiling, and waited for his friends to leave before picking up his sheets again. He sighed and crossed out an offending word, trying to concentrate as his mind drifted back to Azhar and Maya.

What was the right move here? Would he be within his rights to ask Maya out or would that jeopardise his friendship with Azhar? Was it sensible to stay away from the whole toxic situation altogether?

The astonishing thing is, it had been nearly a year since they had started college, and he still hadn’t got over Maya. He had lost weight, he had gone on dates, he was a high performer at university and, above all, he had a group of friends that he cared for and who seemed to care for him. His confidence and self-esteem had risen incredibly over the past year and he was a very different person from the shy, fat boy who had graduated from school.

And yet, his feelings for Maya had been the one constant in his life, helped along by the fact that they worked in close proximity with one another on the newsletter. He thought of the fire and passion she had brought to their publication, her refusal to give up on any story once she decided to get it, and he smiled to himself. The fact that one man and his dog read the newsletter had not deterred her in any way.

Harsha may have been the one putting together the newspaper – and the one who got much of the kudos – but it truly had been a team

effort between the three of them – Maya, Shane and Harsha, with some interference from others such as Christina.

He sighed, picked up the sheet just discarded by Junaina and stared at it again. He had to make sure it was absolutely spot on; he couldn't leave room for any errors on a piece about racism. In her corner, Christina frowned as she grappled with the headline on her piece.

They worked in peace for about ten minutes when the door suddenly banged open, startling them both, and a figure marched in purposefully and stood in front of Harsha's desk.

"Maya! What the... Do you have any idea how little time we have before we go to print? I literally..."

"Never mind that, Harsha! I need to talk to you now! In private!"

Harsha was shocked into silence, as much by her use of his actual name rather than his nickname as by anything else. He scanned her face and thought she looked distressed and slightly deranged, with dark circles under her eyes and a few wisps of hair floating about her face. Of course, he still thought she was beautiful in her usual plain *salwar kameez* and jeans combination.

He just nodded and stood up. "Will be back in ten minutes," he said to the wide-eyed Christina, who was looking at them both with an open mouth.

Maya followed him out without even acknowledging Christina's presence, which was further evidence of her distracted state – Harsha had never known her not to be polite and friendly to all of the assorted, ragtag group of journalists under their command.

He led her out of the newspaper office and behind the library to a verdant spot just by the cricket field; a place he used to escape to in his first few days of university, when it had all seemed so new, scary and bewildering.

Maya did not say a word until they reached a bench under a neem tree. They sat down under its protective reach, its fresh green leaves hanging over them, and then he turned to her.

"What's going on?" he asked, as soothingly as he could.

She turned her burning eyes on him and asked: "Did you know?"

"Know what?" he asked, but his heart sank. He thought he knew what she was going to ask.

"That Azhar was cheating on me?"

He squirmed in his seat on the bench, and a bitter smile appeared on her lips.

"So. Well done. We've now broken up. It's *over*. Are you happy?"

"What do you mean, Maya? Why would I be happy? What have I done?" he asked, somewhat pathetically.

"Well, *Harsha*, you haven't exactly helped matters, have you?"

"What? Maya, I understand that you're upset, but what have I done? How was any of this any of my business?" Harsha asked, his surprise turning to annoyance. There was a time when he would have been crushed by her disapproval, but the past year had improved his opinion of himself, and at that moment he did not want to sit there and bleat pathetically while Maya took out her frustration on him.

"Well – did you or did you not know about Azhar's ... *adventures*?" she bit off.

"Are you blaming me for them?" he asked hotly, leaning back and looking at her through narrowed eyes.

"You answered my question – clearly you *did* know. Well, why didn't you tell me about them? Am I not your friend as well?"

Harsha's mouth opened, but after a second, he shut it again. He had no idea what to say.

Maya looked at him, concentrated fury in her eyes. "*Bros before hos*, is it?"

"Maya! No!" Harsha said, looking around to see if anyone was listening. A priest was walking towards the library, glancing at them with interest, his clean white robe shining in the sunlight, but apart from that there was no one within earshot.

Harsha leaned forward and dropped his voice anyway, saying: "I couldn't get involved, Maya. Don't you understand? Isn't it obvious that I ... care for you? Deeply? How could I then have got involved in any way and not have felt guilty that I did it out of self-interest?"

Maya looked at him, her anger wilting slightly. Then she said in a hurt voice: "All of that shouldn't have mattered, Harsha. You were also my *friend*."

In that moment, Harsha realised with a shock that she was right,

and he bowed his head, unable to look at her. He stared at his feet for fully a minute, and when he looked up, he saw that Maya had a great expression of sadness on her face that moved him and hurt him at the same time.

"I'm... you're right. I should have told you what I knew. Which wasn't much, I assure you," he said as reassuringly as he could.

To his utter horror, tears welled up in Maya's eyes. She dashed them away with the back of her hand. "I... I don't know why I ... fell for him so much or ... you know, thought he was someone else ... I ..." she sniffed and looked away.

They sat in silence, Harsha not knowing what to say.

She turned to him, blinking away tears. "I needed to hear you apologise, Harry. Don't mind me."

He waited a few more minutes before he asked the question that had been running through his mind for the past year. "Maya... do you mind if I ask... why Azhar? I mean, I love him to death, he is my best friend, but... you and him... it's just... so weird," he said, stammering slightly in his effort not to cause offence.

Maya looked blankly at the old library building in front of her and said: "Azhar is a very charming person. When you're in his view, he makes you feel like you're the only person in this world. Plus, I admit, the fact that he's very handsome, that had an impact on me... And... well..."

Harsha waited, and then prompted her: "And?"

"And... I wanted to punish my parents for forcing me to marry!" Maya ended in a defiant rush. "I wanted to choose the last person they would want – a Muslim. It was ... a form of rebellion! Do you understand?"

Harsha was silent. He didn't want to say what was on his mind – which was that Maya sounded completely insane.

"It wouldn't have worked in the long run, Maya," he said, gently. "Not because of the Muslim thing, but because Azhar... I mean, he's just ... a different type of person to you."

She dashed fresh tears away from her eyes and said angrily: "I know! I know! I know! I *know* it was crazy. But now..." She choked back a sob and then continued: "I don't know if I am sad about losing Azhar or the life that I had pictured with him."

Harsha looked at her curiously. "Did you... see yourself marrying him? Having children with him?"

She bridled at this and said: "Well, why not? You should see the kind of horrors my mother wants me to marry. Oiled-haired monstrosities who just want a wife to cook and clean for them! He would have been infinitely preferable to them all!"

Harsha didn't want to make excuses for Azhar, but he couldn't resist saying: "The guy is just a child. You are so much older than him, Maya – more mature, I mean."

She nodded and smiled at him and his heart gave a little leap. Even with puffy eyes and crazy hair, she looked so beautiful. Should he be taking advantage of this situation? He felt an irrational pressure to do something – hold her hand, or even kiss her. The thought excited and terrified him in equal measure.

She said to him: "The thing is, Harry, I do need to get married, and soon, or my family will never forgive me. Much as I hate them for it, I also don't want to lose them. Life without my parents? I can't even imagine it! That's the unfortunate situation, Harry."

"Is it really? Surely they understand that you're just eighteen? That's incredibly young in this day and age!"

She shook her head. "You don't know my family. My... my... mother – she's a very traditional woman. I basically came to university just to postpone the day of marriage. Either I find someone myself or they find someone for me. But in two, maybe three years if I'm lucky, I need to be married."

This statement put an instant barrier between them. He had been in love with her ever since he had met her – but was he willing to get married so soon? He still thought of himself as absurdly young, and with his whole life in front of him. The thought of marriage at the age of 18, or even 20 or 21, was almost too terrifying to contemplate.

Did this make him a terrible person? A coward? He looked up at Maya and once again thought about how beautiful she was. Why wasn't life simpler?

Her hand found his and he gripped it. "I'm really sorry," he said, finally.

A smile appeared on her face again, but another tear fell onto her cheek. "So am I," she said.

## 6

“Who is this dude?” Junaina asked in a loud stage whisper to Harsha, who tried to shush her.

“Vivek Matthew,” Harsha responded shortly.

“*Vivek Matthew*? What kind of a name is that?” she added irrepressibly, but to Harsha’s relief the professor in the front of the classroom didn’t appear to have heard them. Harsha shushed Junaina anyway.

Maya leaned over from the other side of Harsha on the bench and whispered urgently: “He’s the head of the English department, idiot, and in line to be the next dean. He’s a powerful dude.”

Richard leaned forward from the bench behind and asked: “Why do you two know so much about him?”

Maya and Harsha looked at each other meaningfully and didn’t say anything. Junaina’s eyes narrowed.

“You two are up to something,” she declared.

“You’re smelling a rat, are you, Juni?” Shane asked from his usual spot next to Richard in the bench behind them.

Harsha looked over at the Professor Matthew, who was sitting sprawled in the chair in front of the classroom, idly looking at the linguistics book in front of him, waiting for the class to fill up. He was rake-thin, neatly dressed and had laughter lines about his eyes and either side of his small moustache.



"Where is everyone, anyway?" Junaina asked, looking around at the classroom, which was about half full, a pleasant buzz of conversation wafting through it. "I know it's early in the morning, but usually you don't have *this* many slackers."

Harsha shook his head. "We're done with all our exams, we're basically done with this year. Anyone who doesn't need the attendance record isn't going to come."

"Well Azhar *definitely* needs the attendance record – isn't he coming?" Junaina asked, leaning over Harsha to look at Maya, who stared back stonily.

"Don't look at me. I have no idea," she said, a little coldly. Junaina raised her eyebrows at Harsha, who shook his head slightly. When Junaina kept nudging him with her elbow, he scrawled on a piece of paper the words: *they broke up again*.

"Thank God," Junaina muttered under her breath. "Let's hope she doesn't take him back this time."

Harsha leaned back in exasperation and glanced at Maya to see if she had heard, but she was staring in front of her, a vacant look in her eyes.

"Azhar is conspicuous by his absence," Shane said from the row behind them, raising a chuckle among the group.

Harsha turned around to look at Shane with mock seriousness: "Instead of sitting there spouting cliches, why don't you come up with a strategy of how to talk to Vivek Matthew?"

"What? Why do you need to talk to Vivek Matthew?" Junaina asked sharply. Harsha ignored her and instead turned his gaze to Richard. "Everything ok, buddy?" he asked solicitously.

Richard smiled and nodded in a slightly strained manner from beside Shane.

"No more... er... issues ... since that last ... incident?"

Richard shook his head vigorously. "I'm absolutely fine, *machan*," he said, briefly clapping Harsha on the shoulder, and then a grin appeared on his face. "Doctor said to smoke lots of weed."

Before Harsha could say anything more, there was a sudden, familiar burst of static from the tannoy, and a voice boomed out across the entire campus through various judiciously placed speakers, saying: "Please stand for the morning prayer."

Owing to months of habit – years in many cases – thousands of bums shifted from their seats at the same time. The scramble of seats could be heard across the 100 acres of St Patrick's College as a thousand students in various stages of wakefulness stood up for the customary morning prayer.

But at this, the hitherto silent professor suddenly perked up, and said: "Sit down, everyone."

*"Our Father, who art in heaven..."* the voice from the tannoy began.

"I said sit down!" the professor thundered over the prayer. Many of the students sat down uncomfortably, while others like Junaina dropped cheerfully back onto their seats. Harsha descended slowly, eyeing the professor with interest. What point was he trying to make?

*"Give us today our daily bread..."* the tannoy blared on, and the professor looked around pleasantly, taking in the students' faces, some of whom looked amused while others looked outraged by this act of blasphemy.

*"You may sit down,"* the voice from the tannoy ended.

The professor seemed to take this as a cue to stand up, and he did just that, smiling pleasantly at the class around him. "Morning. Sorry if I offended anyone, but I believe in a secular prayer. Standing up is a Christian custom – let's not impose it on everyone. My name is Vivek Matthew; I'm filling in for Professor Sundaran today."

"Anyone would be an improvement on Sundaran," Junaina whispered to Harsha, who shushed her and looked back up at the smiling professor, who fortunately was looking at a different section of the classroom at the time.

"You're done with your exams. I'm only teaching you one class. It all feels a bit pointless, doesn't it? You seem very angry," the professor said to a young man who Harsha knew was called Thomas, but very little else other than the fact that he was irredeemably boring to talk to.

"Sir," the boy said, standing up.

*"Ayyo, sit down. Why does everyone in this college want to stand up all the time?"*

"Sir, I think we should give respect to the morning prayer," Thomas said, as pompously as he could manage while pausing in the act of standing up and having to sit down again.

“So, if I stand, that’s giving respect is it? What if I stand up and think about Asin in a mini skirt?”

A titter went around the classroom, though Harsha could feel Maya sit up and bristle next to him. He knew well that this was not a brand of humour she approved of.

Almost as though he was reading Maya’s thoughts, Professor Matthews apologised a little shamefacedly for the joke. “Apologies - that was a bit tasteless of me, no? I just want you all to think a little bit beyond all these customs and see what they mean,” he explained.

He walked over to the front of the classroom, looking out into the courtyard, deep in thought, and then said: “Yesterday, I was talking to the parish priest, and he asked me to organise all the boys and girls in the congregation to take a trip to the village so that they can observe how the caste system in India works. I asked him: ‘Why do they have to go so far, Father, can’t they just observe the church congregation?’”

Ripples of laughter went through the class, and Harsha raised his eyebrows at Junaina – clearly this was something that hit a nerve among the Christian contingent in the class.

“Am I right?” Professor Vivek asked walking over to their side and looking at Shane, who had given the loudest laugh of them all. “What *you* think?”

Shane replied: “Sir, I don’t go to church.”

The professor joined the rest of the laughter and then asked: “Out of principles or out of laziness? Out of laziness? Very good! I approve,” he said, correctly reading Shane’s grin and turning his gaze to Harsha. “How about you? No wait, wait, how stupid of me. You’re quite fair, slightly plump... Brahmin?”

The class burst into laughter, and Harsha felt a tingling sensation go through his body, a mixture of shock and growing annoyance both at the teacher and his classmates. He had liked Professor Vivek’s opening remarks, especially the part about the secular prayer, but he felt that liking dissipate as he looked at the man’s smiling countenance.

“No, sir,” he said.

“What?” the professor said, looking at him in mock surprise. “Not even a little bit? But you would make such a good Brahmin!”

After another ripple of laughter died down, Harsha reluctantly admitted: “On my mother’s side.”

Vivek Matthew didn't say anything, but instead his eyes shifted from him to Junaina and he said: "I'm afraid in my class you will hear a lot of anti-Brahmin talk. You mustn't take it personally. I don't mean anything against any individuals."

Harsha stared at the professor, stone-faced and unamused.

Shane stirred behind Harsha and said loyally: "Sir, you're talking to the wrong people. Neither of these two are *pukka* Brahmins. It's not like they are walking around with a *namam* and a *poonal*."

"Is that what marks out a Brahmin these days?" Professor Vivek asked mildly. "Of course, there are Brahmins who are religious, but don't make the mistake of thinking they can only be identified by 'namam' and 'poonal'."

He hesitated for a second and then said: "Oh well, it's not like I was planning to teach you anything useful anyway. I might as well blabber about this."

He went up to the board and wrote down the word 'sanskritisation'.

"That's what I call it," he confided, dusting the chalk from his hands. "In the old days, Brahmins used to speak a different language from the other castes, as a way of distinguishing themselves from the rabble – Sanskrit. Today, things have changed... or have they?" He paused and smiled at the class. "Today, they go to elite schools where people speak only English, they go to the US to study, then either their parents will arrange a marriage for them with another Brahmin, or they will marry a foreign girl. Or if they come to a college like St Patrick's, they will look down at all the others as hopelessly backward, with poor English and no sophistication. Am I right?" he asked Harsha and Junaina.

Junaina didn't look like she was going to say anything so Harsha said: "It looks like I am the official spokesperson for Brahmins here. I don't know, sir - my father was from a lower caste in Bengal. But I have to say..."

"Go on," Vivek Matthews said, as Harsha hesitated.

"It sounds like an unfair generalisation, sir. All Brahmins are like that? Every one of them?" Harsha shook his head. "It sounds like a self-defeating point from which to begin a debate."

The classroom stirred at this, many of their gazes flicking from Harsha to Vivek Matthew as though watching a tennis match.

"What, man, are you telling me that when you talk to your classmates from school, they don't laugh at idiots like me who speak with such a strong Tamil accent? Don't they call the girls here '*malli poo*'?"

"What is *malli poo*," Richard asked under his breath, but the professor heard him.

"*Malli poo* is jasmine. Only very traditional girls wear it in their hair nowadays," the professor said, turning and smiling an apology to one or two girls who did indeed have the fragrant blossoms tied around their hair buns.

The pounding in Harsha's head receded and he grudgingly had to accept that there was a grain of truth to what the professor said. Vivek caught his expression and smiled again and said: "I want to stress again that I don't have anything against any individuals. I want *society* to change."

A truly horrible-sounding ringtone blared out and Professor Vivek jumped, before taking a battered old Nokia phone out of his pocket.

"Just one minute," the professor muttered and walked out of the room.

Predictably, a buzz of conversation spread across the room. Shane clapped Harsha on the shoulder and said: "What man, Brahmin."

"Fuck off," Harsha said, irritated. "I'm *not* Brahmin and in any case why should it matter? Juni why aren't you backing me up here?"

"Because who gives a shit?" Junaina exclaimed, looking at Harsha in surprise. "You're also an idiot, taking all this rubbish seriously."

"Come on, Juni," Maya said, seriously. "That professor was out of line. How does it help to keep raking up all this caste rubbish and what does he know about our Harsha?" she asked, glancing sympathetically at him.

"Guys, what happened?" Richard asked.

"What do you mean, what happened?"

"I don't know, I didn't really understand what was happening," Richard said, a comically baffled expression on his face.

The group chuckled at this, and the tension drained out of the air as Harsha smiled affectionately at Richard. "I think as long as you don't understand any of this stuff, you're on the right track, Ricky."

Professor Vivek re-entered the room, looked around at the happy chatter and said: "You know what, I don't want to waste your time and my time, so why don't you just take the rest of the hour off? Everyone gets attendance. Just go!"

The students reacted to this suggestion with alacrity, and there was a great scraping of benches as a number of them stood up even before the professor had finished his sentence.

"Let's go to the canteen and get some samosas or something," Richard said.

"What samosa and all. I'm going for a smoke. You coming or what?" Junaina asked.

"We have plenty of time, let's get something to eat and *then* have a smoke."

"Fine. Harry, you coming?"

Harsha shook his head. "Unless Shane comes up with a better idea in the next minute, I'm just going to tackle our dear professor directly. You guys go ahead to the canteen and I'll join you for a tea and a smoke after."

Shane clapped him on the shoulder. "Best of luck!" he declared before getting up and heading towards the door.

"I'll bring you some samosas," Maya said, smiling at him.

"No no! I'll never lose weight if I'm not careful. Can't have everyone condemning me as a Brahmin all the time," Harsha said good-naturedly. "I'll join you for a smoke in about 15 minutes. In Maal's?"

The rest of them agreed and sauntered towards the exit, though Maya gave him a quick thumbs-up before she left.

Harsha picked up his copy of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, put his feet up on the bench and started reading, though he kept one eye on the professor, who was still fumbling about with his phone.

Eventually, Vivek stopped texting and looked up. Harsha's eyes snapped back towards his book. He would wait for the professor to come to him.

"*Enna pa*, don't want to mingle with the other castes, is it?" the man said pleasantly and sauntered up the aisle in a classroom which

was now empty apart from the two of them.

Harsha's head snapped up in surprise and he put his legs down and frowned. News story or not, he didn't have to put up with this. "Sir, I would prefer not to have this conversation with you; I don't want to be rude to a professor," he said stiffly.

Professor Vivek threw his head back and laughed. He had a booming and infectious laugh, and it went on for a while as Harsha glowered at him.

Finally, when his laughter subsided, the professor shook his head and said: "That was just a sad attempt at humour. I don't really think you are like that." He paused and sat down on a bench in front of Harsha and then said: "And don't pay too much attention to my rants, I'm just a bitter man. I've seen a few things that you don't know too much about. People who were whipped because they ate beef, and were made to drink cow urine and eat cow dung because they were Dalits - disgusting things, you wouldn't even believe it."

Harsha looked at the suddenly-changed expression on the professor's face. He noticed that the lines around his eyes were even deeper than he had first thought, and realised that the man must be older than he had originally assumed. His own expression softened a bit, and he said: "That sounds horrific. Er... was it done by Brahmins?"

"Actually, no. A lot of people think that it's the Brahmins who suppress the other castes, but it's usually the other castes that are themselves low down in the hierarchy. They are very insecure, you see. It is human nature to want to look down on *someone*."

Harsha nodded, comprehension dawning on his face. "Like how some people gang up on one kid in class and bully him because they don't want to be bullied themselves?" he asked.

The professor looked in surprise at Harsha and said: "I didn't think of that, but yes, I guess that must be similar. Interesting analogy."

Harsha laughed. "I've been bullied enough for being fat, sir, to understand how the human mind works." He paused and then said: "Why do you hate Brahmins so much, then, if they're not the ones doing these bad things?"

The professor looked down and seemed to lose himself in thought for a second, before saying: "First of all, I don't *hate* Brahmins or

anyone else. But secondly - sometimes beating and hurting someone isn't the worst thing that you can do." He looked up directly at Harsha and waved his hands in a circle, trying to explain his point: "Sometimes, the upper caste, or class, they lead their own life, shutting out those below. This is not just Brahmins – this happens in every society around the world. So the best jobs, the best schools, even the best restaurants – they seem almost reserved for the top class. That shutting out – that can be more damaging than actually physically hurting someone. Does that make sense?"

"I suppose so," Harsha said, frowning in an effort to understand.

Professor Vivek sighed and stood up to walk over to his desk and began to collect his belongings.

Harsha had waited for his moment, and some instinct within him told him that this was it.

He cleared his throat, feeling a sudden jolt of nerves and then said: "Could you explain something to me, sir?"

"Vivek," the man said, as he put his sheets together clumsily and shoved them into his folder. "Carefully arranged all these papers and didn't even take the class. What was I thinking?" he muttered to himself.

"I'm sorry?"

"Call me Vivek," the man said and picked up his bag and stood there and looked enquiringly at Harsha.

"Oh ... alright, Vivek," Harsha said, uncomfortably, and then ploughed on, fully aware that the benign expression on the professor's face could disappear altogether. "Why is it that people in this university are so fixated on injustice in the wider world, but are quiet on the injustices that go on within our own campus?"

The professor's mouth dropped open.

"Oh!" Professor Vivek said finally, comprehension dawning on his face. "You're that racism fellow!" he declared, pointing at Harsha.

Harsha's stomach clenched at this. Was his reputation already so widespread within the university? He wasn't sure how he felt about this. He just wanted to be a student – how had he made himself into some sort of human rights activist?

The professor came back to sit opposite Harsha again, looking at him searchingly and with renewed interest. "So, you want to do a



piece on the racist professors in the university, eh?"

Christ – how did everyone *know* this already? He had only ever spoken to one professor and his close circle of friends about his intentions.

"We're a team, sir. It's not just me. And not racist professors, s... eh, Vivek. Just the one professor," Harsha said. He hesitated and then added. "Professor T.K."

Professor Vivek pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and then looked carefully at Harsha.

"What evidence do you have that he is racist?" he asked, finally.

"Sir, he doesn't exactly hide it! He has called my Muslim friend Osama bin Laden, he calls my Mizorami friend 'Chinaman' and as for me..."

"What does he call you?"

Harsha hesitated and then said: "Mukherjee... Chatterjee... whatever Bengali name comes to his mind."

"Is that racist?"

"It's the *way* he says it... And he is just a nasty, petty man. A bully. But the bigger problem is that the culture of this place *allows* him to get away with it!" Harsha stopped right there, looking warily up at the professor, to see if he had gone too far. But the man just looked at him with an inscrutable expression.

"Ok, so what exactly is stopping you from publishing a piece?" he asked, finally.

Harsha's mouth fell open. Was the professor giving him tacit consent to do the article?

"Sir, we *are* publishing a piece about racism around the campus. I have done a survey that shows nearly 80% of North Eastern and Tibetan students experience some form of racism, and nearly *all* the Muslim students – but it's about racism between students. Not professors."

"I see. And why not professors as well?"

"Professor D'Souza..."

"Really? Professor D'Souza is stopping you?" Professor Matthews jumped in, his eyebrows knitting together.

"He isn't exactly *stopping* me... He just said... he said..."

"You can tell me. Neither D'Souza nor I care."

"He said that Professor T.K. is an animal, and that animals are not worth bothering with," Harsha admitted, smiling apologetically.

There was a brief silence during which Professor Vivek Matthews' fingers drummed on the desk as he sat in silent thought. Finally, he broke out in a smile and said: "You have put me in a difficult position. Or should I say – I have put *myself* in a difficult position talking rubbish. I gave all those lectures about Brahmins, and now, you point out injustice in my own department, and I can't simply do nothing about it. But at the same time, to expose a professor in this way – it would ruin his career."

Harsha bowed his head. He did know this as well. Much as he hated T.K., there was a part of him that did not want to inflict such humiliation on him, or on any other person. He didn't want to be the one responsible for someone losing his job. Why did the man make it so hard for himself, though?

Finally, Professor Matthews said: "Now, the newspaper is your responsibility, and D'Souza's responsibility. I can't tell you what to write. But I can make suggestions." He took a deep breath and then said: "Go ahead with your racism piece as it is, without naming Professor T.K. But you can also write an editorial in addition to that, calling for professors and other leaders of St Patrick's – idiots like myself – to set an example for students by being inclusive and tolerant and so on..."

He continued to think for a second, and then said: "In this piece, you can also demand that the university have an anonymous helpline for reporting racism and racist language. Add sexism and any other form of injustice."

Harsha leaned forward with interest, pushed his book aside and said: "And you will actually do it, then?"

Vivek pursed his lips and said: "I can certainly do my best to make sure it happens."

"And then, sir?"

"And then, if there are multiple reports of racism from any individual, we will take action. If you are right about T.K. - and I am not doubting that you are - it will only be a matter of time before we have a reason to deal with that situation."

Harsha cleared his throat. This conversation was going far better than he had hoped, but he wanted to make sure that he saw the

problem from every angle. "Sir, I feel like ... you know ... some people might take advantage of that system... you know... if they have a grudge against another person or a professor..."

Vivek stood up at this, smiling, and said: "Don't be idiotic. We won't be believing every Tom, Dick and Harry who shouts racism. Where there are multiple complaints and we have clear evidence, *then* we can investigate. That's how things are done properly. No one will be thrown out based on one or two angry students.

"But look," he added, gathering up his bag and making as if to leave. "We are getting *far* ahead of ourselves. This is only a twinkle in your eye. First you go and write your article and your editorial."

Harsha stood up with the professor and nodded. "It's an *amazing* idea, s... Vivek. Genuinely great. Thank you so much! So – I'll go and start writing my editorial now. And then, what happens?"

"And then," the professor said, dusting the chalk off his trousers, "Then I will do my bit."

## 7

***“A race that has run its course.”***

*Making the shift from school to university is a difficult transition for many students. For many, including for the editors of this publication, the change is one of the most robust challenges they have faced in their lives up to that point. University brings a certain freedom that can be intoxicating. You are now on your chosen path and preparing for life in the real world. How well your preparation goes is down to you and to your university.*

*Most students, whatever private grumbles they may have, generally accept that St Patrick’s holds its end of the bargain up admirably. Not only do we have a high standard of professors teaching us ...”*

“We do? How come I’ve never met any of them,” Junaina interrupted, and Maya looked up from her newspaper in exasperation.

“Come on, we had to say that, no? We can’t say half our professors don’t know how to find their own bums with their hands, even if it’s accurate,” Maya said, and a chuckle went round the table.

She quickly looked around the little dark interior of Maal’s, the local teashop that was the haunt of the St Patrick’s students who fancied a cheap coffee and cigarette away from the screaming glare of the Chennai sunshine, to make sure that no one was listening. “D’Souza kind of made us put it in though.”

Harsha took a sip of his coffee and said: “We have to soften the blow, right? Say a few nice things before dropping the bombshell.”

"I agree. This is fantastic, guys," Richard said with enthusiasm, if a little indistinctly, as he lit a cigarette with a battered old lighter. "Go on reading!" he added, eventually blowing out a steady stream of smoke.

*Not only do we have a high standard of professors teaching us, Maya continued, but we also belong to an institution that puts social work and positive change at the heart of its values. As we make the transition from childhood to adulthood, there are few better ways of preparing for the real world.*

*Yet, there are some ways in which St Patrick's needs to catch up with reality. We live in a multicultural society – a society in which human beings are more mobile than they have been ever before, and thanks to cable TV and mobile phones, we have become more aware of people from other backgrounds and walks of life than we have ever been in the past.*

*The racism report commissioned by this publication (see Top News story on Page 1) shows that a shocking 67% of St Patrick students have experienced some form of abuse – whether casteist, racist or sexist. It seems that minorities facing discrimination are in the majority at this great institution..."*

Maya stopped and looked up at Harsha, smiling. "That was a nice bit of wordplay," she said.

"What wordplay?" Junaina demanded, looking at Maya, Harsha and then at Richard, who shrugged his shoulders, a beatific smile on his face.

"Just read on – we get the main idea," Richard said, crushing his cigarette in the ash tray in the middle of the table.

*The students have spoken – albeit anonymously – and it is now time for St Patrick's to listen. We, the editorial team at St Patrick's Express, ask that a helpline be established for students to be able to report abuse of any kind. This is the only way we can independently verify that..."*

"You've got balls, dude," Richard said, clapping Harsha on the back.

Harsha smiled, but looked a little pained at this. "Ricky – you're my biggest cheerleader and don't think I don't appreciate it. But I have to stress – the credit isn't all mine. It was a team effort. The front page article came from Shane's survey idea. And Maya has driven all of us down this path."

Maya shook her head. "I agree it was a team effort, Harry, but you really took most of the burden on your shoulders. Just take the compliment and be happy!"

Harsha opened his mouth to argue, but at that point he looked up to see Shane stomping up the steps to Maal's and bending his tall frame in through the entrance. He came up to the table, excitedly slammed a second copy of *St Patrick's Express* on the table, sending cigarette ash flying everywhere, and squeezed in next to Richard.

"Everyone's talking about it," Shane said, looking at Harsha. "*Everyone*. The English department is all abuzz, classes are starting late. We've done it, Harry. *We've actually made people read the school newsletter*," he said, his dimple deepening, as he gestured to a waiter. "Oy – Kasi – one cheese omelette, please."

"And did it without getting T.K. involved," Richard said, shuddering slightly. "I think that's the best part!"

Harsha nodded fervently. He was awash with relief after the decision was made not to name Professor T.K. in their reporting. Even though the professor arguably deserved to be named and shamed, the idea of being the one to do it had left Harsha feeling a gamut of emotions – stress, tension, and above all, guilt. Who would be a journalist? Not him!

He felt very grateful to Vivek for having suggested this elegant solution that would allow him to raise the issue of racism in a meaningful way without having to actually get into trouble with T.K.

Or so he thought.

It was obvious as Professor T.K. stormed into their classroom to take a class on 20th century English poetry that he wasn't in the best of moods. He looked at them through beady eyes, his moustache bristling, and read out the first few lines of *Slough* by John Betjeman.

"Come friendly bombs and fall on Slough!" he spat out, looking in a frenzied manner from corner to corner. "It isn't fit for humans now! You hear me, man?" he said, pointing at one particularly blank-looking fellow in the back row. "Not fit for humans! You go to T. Nagar during rush hour traffic and you will know what he means!"

There was something of the showman about Professor T.K., and his impact on a classroom of somnolent teenagers was electric. Harsha would never quite like his style – he personally preferred someone who taught the subtleties of metaphor and language – but he had to

admit to himself that the man was an excellent teacher in his own way. Pity about the bullying and the racism.

"Tinned milk, tinned beans, tinned minds," Professor T.K. continued. "What is he talking about here, man? You. Yes, you. What is he talking about?"

Harsha watched some hapless front-bencher stand up slowly, look to either side as though for support, and then say: "Sir, they're eating food out of tins."

"Yes, yes," T.K. said impatiently. "But what does he mean 'tinned minds'?"

"Sir... they're all eating out of tins, so their body is also getting some tin," the student said, falteringly.

"What are you babbling about? Sit down!" T.K. said impatiently. His eyes roved to the back of the classroom and he pointed to Shane. "You."

Shane stood up and said gravely: "I believe he's talking about how narrow-minded these people are, sir."

T.K. didn't say anything. Harsha couldn't tell whether he was pleased that someone had actually made a good point or disappointed that he couldn't yell at someone. What was the guy's problem?

The class went on in this manner, with everyone on tenterhooks, waiting to be pointed at by the professor and potentially humiliated. Grudgingly, though, Harsha had to admit that the class was enhancing his appreciation of *Slough*. Also, to his surprise, there were no insults being thrown around: no racist or sexist comments – nothing. Was the man turning over a new leaf?

When the bell rang, T.K. nodded to them all and then turned to Harsha and said: "Oy, newspaperman, come outside for a second."

A frisson went through the group at the back, and Harsha looked around at them nervously before getting up. What on earth was going to happen now? His heart thumped as he made his way towards the exit, every step an effort. A tingling sensation went through his body as he stepped over the threshold.

When he came out of the classroom, T.K. was leaning against the parapet, and Harsha felt very aware of the man's broad shoulders and slim frame. When he turned to face Harsha, he had an expression like black thunder.

"So. So. Racism on campus, eh?" Professor T.K. said through gritted teeth.

Harsha's heart fell.

The professor looked at him contemptuously for a second and then continued: "Do you know what high standards we have here in this university? Do you know that this is the *Number One* university for arts in India? Do you know what work we are doing here, what we are trying to achieve? And you ... you have the gall, the *temerity* to ..."

At this point T.K. seemed to run out of words in his anger and Harsha stared at the man, speechless. He had expected a backlash, but not this level of rage. Other students walking along the corridor had stopped to listen.

T.K. took a few deep breaths, all the while glaring contemptuously at Harsha. Then he shook his head, still breathing heavily, and said with a bitter laugh: "Young people today, eh? So entitled. So pompous, so full of so-called progressive values. Always taking offence. Always so quick to play the race card, so quick to shout racism, sexism, whatever-ism. Against religious education. Against *everything*. All you want to do is complain about things and not actually *do* anything with your lives. No respect for the people who have *ideas*, the people who are pushing boundaries, for the people who are actually changing the world!"

There was an uncanny silence in the vast corridor of the English department, as everyone had stopped in their tracks. Harsha's mouth was open as he searched T.K.'s furious face for some sign of sanity. The man seemed to have become completely unhinged.

"Sir, I..."

"Be quiet! This is a great institution, and I won't stand here and let you try and soil its reputation! Because that's all you can do - *try*! St Patrick's, and the great movement of education, of passing on the word of God, will not be challenged by someone such as you," T.K. continued, a bit of spittle flying out of his mouth.

Harsha felt a movement next to him and he turned slightly to see that Maya and Shane had joined them and were now standing either side of him. His heart swelled with happiness, and the panic subsided. Professor T.K. frowned at them both. "What are you two - his bodyguards or something?"

"No, sir," Shane said politely. "We are also involved in the student



newsletter and wanted to hear what you had to say."

"I don't have anything to say except that you should not be permitted to write such garbage!"

"Have you spoken to Professor D'Souza?" Maya asked, equally politely, though Harsha could hear her voice vibrating with resolve.

T.K. blanched and then glared at Maya. She did not flinch, which was more than Harsha could have achieved. The professor looked absolutely terrifying at the moment. Finally, the man turned back to Harsha and then said: "I have not seen you in my class up until now."

"Sir?" Harsha asked, bewildered by this sudden change of tack.

"I have never seen you in my class. How did you get attendance? Getting your classmates to call out your name on your behalf, yes? Attendance by proxy?"

All three of them stared at the professor in disbelief.

"I will not put up with such underhand behaviour. You will lose your entire attendance for my class for the entire semester."

"But sir..." Harsha stared aghast at the professor. T.K. was a frequent professor for them – losing his attendance record would mean he would have to justify his absence to the college dean in order to graduate to the second year. This was particularly galling given that he was one of the few people who actually attended all the classes.

The professor smiled triumphantly. "Be more careful in the future ... Bannerjee or Mukherjee or whatever your name is," he declared, and then turned and stalked off down the corridor at pace.

"What the actual fuck?" Harsha asked his friends, as a buzz started up again around them and students once again went about their various pursuits.

"Don't worry about it," Shane said, soothingly. "It shows that he's scared of you, and he can't really do much about it."

"But what about my fucking attendance?"

"Bah! As though they would ever give you trouble, with the kind of marks you have."

"Very brave, you two," Maya said sarcastically, and Harsha turned to see Junaina and Richard slouch up towards them.

"I don't blame Ricky," Harsha said, quickly. "He can't afford to antagonise T.K. any further."

Junaina glowered at Harsha. "You calling me a pussy or what?"

"If he isn't, I am," Maya said swiftly, glaring at her.

Shane put his arm around Harsha. "Come on. Let's go have some *vada* in the canteen. Juni can pay."

"Fine! Just because I don't want to fight some sort of crusade against professors," Junaina muttered.

"I'll also pay," Richard said, shamefacedly, looking apologetically at Harsha.

The group walked away together, and as they descended the steps of the English department, Harsha realised that he didn't care at all about T.K. or his attendance record or the newspaper, even. Having this group of friends, who always had his back – it was gold dust. He put his arm around Richard's shoulders and ruffled Shane's hair affectionately.

He was the luckiest person on campus.

## 8

The bouncer looked at Junaina doubtfully, his eyes resting briefly upon her lip ring and then taking in her *Iron Maiden* t-shirt, and pursed his lips. He then looked at Shane, in his checked shirt, khaki trousers and sandals, and an expression of relief came over his face.

“No sandals. Only shoes,” he declared, crossing his arms and standing in front of the door.

“What the... this is *why* we shouldn’t have come to a place like this,” Junaina said plaintively, scanning the entrance to Zara, the latest of a series of bars that had cropped up in Chennai at the time. Perhaps because of its novelty, it was clearly the venue of choice for the city’s most fashionable youth.

While the doorway that led into this hallowed sanctuary was just an unprepossessing little stairway next to a restaurant on a busy high street, the area just outside it was teeming with young people dressed on point — the men in torn jeans and perfectly fitted shirts with pointed collars, and the women in tiny skirts, leather handbags hanging over the shoulders and trailing over their straightened — and sometimes subtly highlighted — hair.

Shane brushed Junaina aside and raised his hands in a conciliatory gesture and said to the bouncer: “If I find a pair of shoes, is it ok to come back?”

"Where are you going to..."

"Sorry, was looking for a parking spot. What's going on here?" Azhar boomed out, running up the steps that led to the bar entrance and interrupting the bouncer's peremptory question. His sudden appearance in a magnificent dark purple shirt and perfectly fitted khaki trousers seemed to confuse the bouncer, but he lifted his chin and explained the situation once again.

"No shoes, no entrance," he said, briefly.

Azhar raised one eyebrow and then looked consideringly at the bouncer for a few seconds. Then a little smile came over his face, and he bowed his head and said: "I'm very sorry, sir. Of course, we'll go away and find somewhere else."

"But..."

"Wait, Juni, just one sec. We completely understand your situation, sir," Azhar continued, the smile still on his face.

"I'm just doing my job," the bouncer said defensively, slightly cowed by Azhar's politeness and air of subtle magnificence.

"And a very good job you're doing as well, sir. Let me just give you my card, I'm in the hotel trade as well ... If you ever need a recommendation or somewhere else to work, please get in touch." Azhar took out his wallet, pulled out his business card and handed it to the bouncer, who took it without interest and glanced at it.

Azhar turned around and winked at the others. "Let's go," he said, and started down the stairs. Shane and Junaina followed him reluctantly.

"What a dickhead that guy was!" Junaina said once they had descended to the street, where a few of the other partygoers scattered to make room for them in a cloud of perfume and smugness. "Behaving as though we were the scum of the earth! He was looking for an excuse not to let us in to this place! As though it's the first circle of heaven or something!"

"What was all that with the card?" Shane asked Azhar, looking at him curiously.

"Just wait," Azhar said, smiling, and pulled out a cigarette and lit it and leaned against the wall outside the bar.

"What? What's the point of hanging out *here*? It's hot as hell!"

It was indeed a sultry summer's evening in Chennai, and the well-

dressed people around them were surreptitiously wiping sweat away from their foreheads, while Shane spotted one beautiful young woman in a flowing dress surreptitiously sniff her own armpit to check for a smell. The constant “neek neek” of car horns on the adjacent road added to a clogged atmosphere in the area just outside the bar.

Seemingly oblivious to all this, Azhar calmly leaned his powerful shoulder against the wall. “Trust me,” he said, simply. “Just trust me.”

It only took a few minutes before the bouncer came running down the steps and shouted out: “Sir! Sir! Please, you may come in.”

“Oh yeah?” Azhar said, casually, taking in another drag of his cigarette. “Thank you. We’ll come in shortly.”

“Yes, sir. Whenever you want!” the bouncer said, almost bowing to the trio, a ghastly grin on his face, before backing away hurriedly.

Junaina waved away Azhar’s cigarette smoke from her face and peered at him in confusion.

“Now what the living hell was that all about?” she demanded.

Shane just chuckled and shook his head. “Trust Azhar to come up with something. Remind me – what hotel groups do your family own in Chennai, Azhar?”

“We have interests in pretty much all of them,” Azhar said, grinning. He ground his cigarette out on the cement floor and they ascended the steps towards Zara once more.

After bypassing the suddenly ultra-polite bouncer, they walked into a wall of noise – 90s hip-hop blared out through the various speakers, just about drowning out an excited buzz. The bar was clearly extremely popular at the moment, and every table was packed with a well-dressed, good-looking crowd.

“I don’t see what’s so special about it,” Junaina grumbled, and Shane looked around a little uncomfortably. But Azhar walked in like he owned the place, standing in front of all the tables so he could look around, oblivious to all the glances that came his way, and then smiled as he spotted Maya and Harsha sitting at a table in one corner.

They threaded their way through the various tables – Shane getting as many glances for his muted appearance as Junaina was for her casual look – and sat down, greeting each other warmly.

“Can’t believe the holidays are already gone!”

“Look at how brown you’ve become, Maya! You look so much

more South Indian now!"

"Harry, *what the hell*. You've lost even *more* weight?"

"Looking good, buddy," Shane said, smiling warmly as he took the seat next to Harsha. "Gosh, now there's two of you heartbreakers! Azhar and Harry! Lock up your daughters!"

Harsha jumped at this and shook his head, glancing sideways at Maya, who had a strained look on her face. He noticed she wasn't looking directly at Azhar. "That is absolutely not my style," Harsha said, hastily. "Anyway, where's Ricky?"

"Why are you looking at me, bugger? I don't have Ricky hiding in my pocket," Azhar said.

"He hasn't come back from Mizoram yet," Shane said, pulling out his mobile phone, a rather archaic looking device. "I just had a text from him," he said, with something of a swagger.

"Finally got yourself a phone, Shanny? But look at the size of that thing!"

"It's a Sony Ericsson," Shane said, defensively.

"More like Sony Brick-son," Azhar said, chuckling at his own joke. The others ignored him.

Harsha grinned stupidly at them all and drank in the happy chatter. His summer holidays had been fun. Going out with Azhar and exploring his newfound ability to socialise without being deeply aware of being overweight was a heady experience. He had met some beautiful people and gone to nightclubs and all-night beach parties; things he could never have imagined even a year ago. But being back with his university gang was a reminder that this was the circle in which he was most comfortable, and most able to be himself.

"What have you guys been up to?" he asked, putting an arm around Shane and looking at Azhar and Junaina with shining eyes, hardly able to contain his excitement.

"What do you think we can get up to in this one-horse town?" Junaina asked dismissively.

A few of the people in surrounding tables were glancing over scathingly at them – they must have seemed like a real ruffian group, and not at all the kind to be in a trendy bar. But one or two women were looking at Azhar with great interest that went beyond just curiosity.

"Your reputation must be taking a beating, Azhar, hanging out with a bunch of losers like us," Maya said playfully, and Harsha realised that she must have noticed as well.

Azhar looked up at Maya and there was palpable relief on his face that she was talking to him so normally after how their relationship had ended.

He smiled a little wistfully at her and said, shortly: "You guys are my best friends in the world. Of course you're cool."

"*Wah wah*, what a line," Junaina said, unimpressed. "I guess we should be honoured that the great Azhar is deigning to be friends with us."

"Shut up, fool. I *obviously* meant the other three. Nothing can make you cool," Azhar countered hotly, and then signalled for one of the waiters to come over. "Let's order some drinks. Cocktails for everyone?"

"Rum and Coke for me," Junaina said as the rest of them nodded, and Azhar rolled his eyes.

"One pitcher of Long Island Ice Tea and four glasses. And one rum and Coke. Do you have anything cheaper and worse than JD? Ah, never mind, a JD and coke then," he said.

Shane nodded towards Harsha and Maya and said: "Not to lower the tone – but what's the latest? With Professor T.K., I mean? Did he give you any more trouble, Harry?"

Harsha and Maya glanced at each other, and then Harsha said: "Did you not hear? He's been suspended pending investigation!"

"*What?*"

"Are you serious?"

"Bloody hell!"

All three of the newcomers stared at Harsha in shock as this incredible news slowly registered in their minds. Harsha doubted that any of them had expected this to go so far. In fact, had he? He was honest enough with himself to acknowledge that he had started down this road out of some sort of desire to protect Richard and to impress Maya. It had somehow spiralled into something far bigger.

"The minute the department opened up an anonymous line for reporting racism on campus, they were deluged with complaints about T.K. Not just a few - thousands. Well - more than thirty,

anyway. They had no choice but to do it," said Maya.

Junaina stared at her in astonishment before shifting her gaze to Harsha. "Aren't you... aren't you worried it might come back to bite you? Especially after T.K. chewed you out in front of everyone?"

Harsha shook his head. "Once we had Vivek Matthew on board, it was ok. Besides, this is now the department's responsibility. All we did was report the facts. The *response* was down to them. They get the credit - and the flak," he said.

They all looked at him for a minute, and he blushed slightly at their astonishment and obvious approval.

"The pen is indeed mightier than the sword, eh?" Shane said finally, his trademark dimple popping up. "Well done, both of you!"

"Well done *all* of you," Junaina said warmly. "Getting T.K. suspended - that is absolutely fine by me! Sick of that fucker. What kind of a name is it anyway? I've never heard it before."

Azhar stared at Junaina in surprise. "You do know that it's his initials, right? His name isn't *Teekay*."

"Oh... er... yes I knew that, of course," Junaina stammered.

Before Azhar could say anything more on this subject, Maya cut in, saying: "Credit goes to chief editor and star reporter, Harsha Devnath."

"Rubbish," Harsha said firmly. "Shane was instrumental - and you were the beating heart of this operation, Maya; don't do yourself down." He looked at her keenly, as though to impress that message upon her, and she looked away, embarrassed.

Shane said in his sensible way: "The good thing is - T.K. has been disciplined, and hopefully he changes his ways."

Azhar shook his head at that. "Dude, that guy is not changing - if anything he will come back twice as angry. Don't get me wrong - you guys did amazingly and all, but you're not just going to change the guy's personality like that."

The smiling waiter - who was an antithesis to the bouncer in terms of demeanour - came up with their drinks, and Azhar organised the cocktails for each of them with great fanfare.

Harsha picked up his glass, took a sip, and said: "Thank you, Azhar! This is delicious." He swilled his glass around, staring at its contents for a minute, and then said: "The idea was never to change



T.K.'s personality. Personally, I couldn't care less about his personality or how he sees the world. This was all about setting boundaries. Bullies will always be bullies – believe me on that. The only thing we can do, as adults, is to make sure that they understand that there are consequences for their actions."

There was a brief silence after this profound statement and then Junaina said, with uncharacteristic sincerity: "Harry - you should seriously consider becoming a journalist, dude. You are absolutely in your element here."

Harsha started at this and then looked around to see all of them nodding their heads. He cleared his throat and said: "I don't know if that's something I'm cut out for..."

"Oh yes, you are," Maya said, smiling. "Seriously - you have the right qualities for it. You're talented, you're intelligent, you write well..."

"Ok ok, I wasn't going to go *that* far," Junaina said, putting her glass down decisively.

"Guys," Harsha said a little uncomfortably. "Seriously, let's not..."

Shane said solemnly: "Don't hide your light under a bushel, Harsha."

Harsha turned to Azhar for support, and his best friend clapped him on the shoulder, winked at Shane and said: "Better get on the good side of the future editor of *The Times of India*, people."

"*The Times of India* is a rag," Junaina said, dismissively.

"Fine! *Hindustan Times* then! Or *The Hindu*. Whatever! You get my point," Azhar said. "Let's get the future editor of some paper or the other absolutely hammered tonight!"

## 9

The melancholy strains of the acoustic guitar drifted across the messy, sun-lit room, drowning out the gentle hum of the air-conditioner.

The plush leather sofa was still there, as was the coffee table - but the room had acquired a few more knickknacks over the intervening years, such as a glossy touch lamp beside a bookcase, and a vase housing some rather faded flowers.

A good-looking young man in a sky-blue shirt and khaki trousers sat on a chair just in front of the bookcase and was scanning the books with a slight frown on his face, as though he didn't approve of its contents. It would have taken a casual viewer a while to recognise Harsha now that his cheekbones were visible and his clothes hung slightly off his slender frame.

He sat a little separately from the rest of the room, so you had to pan across to the middle to see the other occupants. Fringed on either side by tall, palm-like indoor plants, Shane looked much the same as he sat comfortably on the sofa. He was looking intently from under his curly mop of hair at the guitar player, Richard, sitting on the floor opposite him.

Next to Shane was Junaina, who had added an eyebrow piercing to her usual lip ring and skull pendant and was wearing a *Dream Theatre* t-shirt on stonewashed jeans. Still the designated roller of joints, she was busy doing just that, the sleeves of her baggy t-shirt

rolled back.

A broken cigarette, a stub of marijuana and a deck of rolling paper were strewn around the coffee table along with a group of mobile phones – a new addition -- and a stack of newspapers.

Richard, opposite them, was manipulating the strings of a guitar expertly, playing the tabs for Led Zeppelin's *Babe I'm Gonna Leave You* and occasionally breaking into song, but too softly for the others to hear properly. He too had lost weight – though in his case the effect was unpleasant, making him look gaunt rather than slim. Next to him, Maya sat quietly, almost hidden by a tall cabinet, hugging her knees and listening in silence to the music.

Standing by the balcony and looking out was Azhar, who looked even more handsome, almost beautiful. A plain black t-shirt with a small Adidas logo hugged his powerful V-shape body and his hair was longer, falling around his neck in curls. His sensual mouth was curved slightly in distaste as he sniffed an ornate whiskey glass.

For a minute they all peacefully went about their various, quiet pursuits. And then Azhar turned around decisively and glared at Richard.

"Ricky, what the hell is this mournful shit you're playing? Either play something fun or put that damn thing away! This is supposed to be a happy reunion, you fool!" he said, the slight slur in his voice suggesting that he had already imbibed a decent quantity of the liquid he was holding.

Richard broke off and looked up at him: "If you want to hear *Top of the World* or *Kumbaya*, go find someone else!" he replied with spirit, before his face darkened, and he looked down to his guitar again.

"What the... what the hell is wrong with you all? Shane! Just sitting there with your mouth open. Maya! You look like you're about to jump off a cliff. And Harry!" he yelled out. "Why the hell are you looking at books? We're not in college any more, bugger! Get your ass over her and stop being so anti-social! Juni! How much longer must we wait for that joint?"

"Easy, Azhar bhai," said Shane, his cheeky grin of old reappearing on his face. "Patience is a virtue, you know."

There was a bark of laughter from Harsha by the bookcase, and he stood up to re-join the group by the sofa. "Good old Shane," he said, affectionately. "I've missed your little aphorisms."

"Apho – what?" Azhar asked. "Bugger, you still talk like a damn dictionary."

Harsha looked pained. "You're supposed to be a literature graduate, Azhar," he said, the undertone of contempt in his voice making Shane and Maya shoot piercing glances at him.

"Oho, big man. *Literature graduate*, I believe," said Junaina, though she kept her eyes on her task and was at that point fashioning a makeshift filter out of a bit of hard paper.

"That is *literally* what he is, idiot. We all are!"

"All except me," said Richard, and they all turned to look at him, Maya placing one sympathetic hand on his shoulder.

There was a silence, and then Harsha said: "Ricky, I'm very sorry, I..."

"Never mind!" Richard said quickly, and then seemed to shake off his gloom and straightened a little. "Come on, let me play something fun. Oasis? Beatles?"

Azhar came forward to the centre of the room and placed one booted foot on top of the coffee table in a dramatic manner, raised his glass of whisky in one hand and said. "No Beatles Shmeetles and all. I'm going to make a speech!"

This dramatic statement unfortunately did not have the desired effect, instead eliciting groans and snorts of laughter from the others in the room.

"Drunk as a wheelbarrow," Shane concluded, dimpling in his old way.

Harsha leaned against the wall, crossed his arms in front of his chest, slightly wrinkling his elegant shirt, and looked amusedly at the man who had once been his inseparable friend.

Undeterred by this reception, Azhar continued: "Guys, I just want to say. It's been a year since we left college."

Maya cleared her throat meaningfully and Azhar turned to her and said: "Yes, yes, I know, it took me a bit longer but shut up – I'm making a SPEECH!"

He adjusted his t-shirt, put down his drink and then, eyes screwed in concentration, he began again. "It's been a year since we went to college together. And we always had great times, and we always drank together, smoked together ..."

Shane and Junaina cheered on each phrase with cries of “Yeah!” and “Well said!” and the like, egging the drunk man on for their own entertainment.

“Do you remember D’Souza?” Azhar roared, now completely in his element. “And d’you remember smoking behind the college bathroom? D’you remember that day at Park Wines when we all drank together for the first time?”

He had the attention of them all now, apart from Junaina – who stuck to her task. Azhar spun around and looked at Harsha.

“It’s all because of you, man. You brought us all together,” he said, sentimentally.

Harsha looked distinctly uncomfortable as everyone turned to look at him.

“Er... ok ... ummm...” he managed.

“No dude, seriously,” Azhar said, earnestly, now planting both feet forward and looking intently at Harsha. “Dude, I’m a Muslim, and I know, ok, I know. I have seen how some people look at us. And I’ve seen how people look at these guys from the North East, from Mizoram and Manipal and call them ‘Chinky’ and so on,” he said, waving to Richard, who didn’t say anything.

“Manipal is in Tamil Nadu, isn’t it? Quite near here?” Shane asked irrepressibly.

“Whatever!” Azhar declared. “The point is ... you – Harsha. It was you, man.” At this point, words failed him and he gave up, misty-eyed.

“Someone tell this drunk fucker to shut up, and we can all smoke this joint. I’ve finished rolling it,” Junaina said from the table.

Harsha looked away from the man who was regarding him with such affection, and said: “Yes, Azhar, enough. Let’s not go down this road again.”

“No, dude. You think I’ve forgotten. But I haven’t. I won’t forget how you helped me study for all the exams and helped me get through them!”

“Those were good times for sure. Lots of ‘joint’ study,” Shane said, giggling at his little joke.

“Speaking of which...” Junaina began.

“Yes, yes alright, fucking hell, I try and be serious for like, *one*

*minute*, and you guys won't let me. Fine! Let's go smoke that joint. On the balcony! Not in here, Juni!" Azhar said, abruptly abandoning his sentimental mood and becoming businesslike instead.

Shane turned to Harsha, who hadn't moved from his spot by the wall. "You coming, Harry?"

"Oh no, I don't smoke any more."

"I don't either – just keeping those jokers company," Shane said, jerking his head towards Azhar, Junaina and Richard, who had already left the little room and moved out onto the balcony. Azhar and Junaina seemed to be arguing over who was going to light the joint.

"I just have a phone call to make, Shane. Will join you in a bit."

His old classmate looked steadily at Harsha, and then nodded and left.

When Shane had shut the balcony door behind him, Harsha sighed and then took out his phone and dialled a number. He turned away towards the bookcase and then spoke into it.

"Hey sweetie, how are you? No no, I'm still here, just ... they've gone out to smoke a joint ... No no, I'm free to talk for a bit ... Well, yes, I know, I do still like them, but you know, I've moved on with my life and they just seem to be doing the same old thing – getting drunk, smoking weed, not really doing anything with their lives. I've just moved on ... No, no, I'm not saying that, I have good memories, but still ... it's different now ... Anyway yes, I'll catch you later. Will call you before I go to bed. Speak soon!"

He hung up, turned around and jumped. Maya was still sitting there in her position by the cabinet.

She looked at his shocked expression sadly, and said: "What happened to our Harsha?"

A silence permeated the room, apart from the hum of the air-conditioner and the muted sound of laughter from the balcony.

"I... Maya... it was... I didn't mean..." Harsha walked forward into the centre of the room of the first time and sat down on the recently-vacated sofa in front of her. He suddenly looked much more like the Harsha of old, and he made a gesture as though to push back the glasses that he hadn't needed to wear for over three years.

The look of penitence in his eyes was replaced by a look of

weariness, a few lines appearing on his young face.

He took a deep breath, leaned forward earnestly and said: "Listen, that sounded worse than it was. It wasn't meant to be heard. I mean, I would hate for Azhar and the rest of those guys to hear it..."

Maya smiled a little and said: "Don't worry. I won't tell them." She shrugged and leaned her chin on her knees and said: "Maybe you're right, and we do need to grow up. Anyway, how is your girlfriend?"

Harsha leaned back at this sudden change of topic, licked his lips and said: "Fine, you know... I guess it's one of those things, I'm not too sure how I got into it, I..."

He reached out one hand towards her and then stopped, letting it drop, and went silent.

"You...?" she asked, leaning forward with something approaching interest.

"I would have... I would have preferred to be with you," he said in a sudden rush of bravado.

Maya shook her head. "We live in different worlds now, Harsha," she said, an uncharacteristic sneer appearing on her face. "You're a high-flying journalist, your name is in the papers every day, you're going to become world-famous. Look at us losers. Shane and Juni are just working in call centres. Azhar is working in his family business and gets bullied by his brothers. Richard – poor Richard – is here to retake his exams! The only one among us who has had to repeat the year. And me," she laughed bitterly and then straightened and looked directly at Harsha, her eyes glittering.

"I'm the worst loser of them all," she continued calmly. "I'm just sitting around at home doing nothing but wait for my parents to marry me off."

Harsha started at the acerbic tone in her voice and leaned forward earnestly, his bad mood having vanished in a sudden jolt of shock and alarm: "That's not true, Maya! Don't... don't give in like this! Your future is bright if you want it to be! This is India!"

"What is that supposed to mean, 'This is India'? What's so great about that?"

Harsha spread his hands out in frustration, and said: "I mean, this is a growing country – it's a land of opportunity – there's plenty going on out there. Don't give up! It's... it's... it's not like you at all to give up! What about all those crusades we fought in university, against

T.K., against racism? The *dalit* marches we covered in the second year? You were a *big* part of that! You *can't* just give up? Surely?"

Maya shook her head. "That was then. This is now. My future has been mapped out for me by my parents, and college was just a way of pushing back that evil day. Now I just have to be focus on being a good wife - hopefully to a good man."

Harsha stared at her open-mouthed. Was this really the fiery Maya he had known and loved? "Why can't you push back against that?" he asked, bluntly. "Must you get married? This is the twenty-first century – why can't you just say no?"

"It's that easy, is it?" she asked, hotly, her eyes blazing in a faint throwback to the passion she had shown him in their university days.

Harsha bowed his head and then said miserably: "I seem to be saying everything wrong today."

There was a silence between them and then Maya said: "I think we're all facing reality, Harsha. University was like a dream. And now we've woken up, and well, some people's lives are better than others. But that's just me being morbid. I am genuinely happy for you that it's going well."

"I... I'm going to England this summer. To study journalism further," Harsha said, and childishly, he scanned her face for her response to this. He was rewarded with a sudden look of pain in her face, though the satisfaction he felt lasted barely a second, and his heart twisted again.

She looked bleakly at him and was about to say something but at that point the others banged their way back into the room. Azhar stopped dead in his tracks and looked at them and said: "Oho! Look at the love birds!"

"Rolling back the years, Harry?" Shane said, smiling.

Harsha stood up and smiled a little painfully at the group, saying: "No, no, nothing like that. Come on, let's get a drink!"

Junaina and Richard cheered and headed towards the sofa, while Azhar went towards the drinks cabinet.

Harsha looked agonisingly at Maya, who smiled reassuringly back at him and jumped up and said: "I'll have a vodka and Sprite, please."

Azhar looked at her in surprise and delight and said: "I thought



you weren't drinking! Glad you're finally seeing some fucking sense! OK!"

"Oy, what's that drink you're pouring? Are you paying some kind of premium on whisky? Put some more, fool!" Junaina said, pinching Azhar on the elbow.

"Shut up, you drunkard, and take what's given you!"

When they all had a full glass in hand, they stood in a circle at the centre of the room and held up their glasses.

Azhar looked up at Harsha and nodded to him.

Harsha hesitated and then said: "To the class of 2004."

"The class of 2004!" they all declared and then drank deeply.

Soon after, they were laughing and talking as though nothing had happened. And for that evening alone, it was as though the world was absolutely perfect.