

A STORY AND THE MAN

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Dedicated to Jitendra

Prologue – Sometime in the Future



The Man had no pretensions. The Man had no answers. No opinions. For the goodwill of the Man, he existed, though it's all up to you how to perceive it.

The eyes that never move, nor close. The head that never shines, nor droops. The body that never moves further, nor retreats. I looked upon the Man as such. I could say more of his nevers and nors, but that would be a waste of precious space, and—far more precious—your attention. Let me come to the Man.

The lines of the face were, well, like his should be. The expressions beyond the explanatory powers of any human language. You would not call him a guide. You would not call him a philosopher. That's not him. These exist in the realm of human genius – mortal excellence that is welcomed with thunderous applause and reverence that can only be completed with the existence of another or many others, rarely in the existence of the solitude of one's own self. The Man was present—or, as much of humanity would define it, 'absent'—in such a solitude. Untouched, unfazed, untied, and disconnected.

Horizontal creases across the forehead framed eyes that seemed to float but remained focused in their vision. The V of the chin met under his lower lip, which was like a disfigured quarter-moon, only to be completed by the

upper that sat casually upon it. The elongated nose had curiously narrow nostrils, while the head was adorned with hair that parted well on the side, with strands of black, grey, and pure white.

While his features were distinct, the Man seemed normal as air. What was visibly distinguishable was his voice which possessed the perfection of an artist and surety that made even an involuntary breath seem important. It was that voice which travelled from his core, making its way through the vibrating cells of his interiors, irritating the strings of vocal cords on the way to creating a symphony that carved out of his mouth to blow into the air and impact the ears of the listener, making its way down the sensory trails, into yet another source, causing vibrations that, as they say, hypnotise the senses, seep into the consciousness, and strike hard somewhere deep inside.

The Man narrowed his eyes and looked on. His gaze was direct, the expression full of meaning and substance that words can seldom define. His voice was gathering momentum.

“Curse.” He said in an audible whisper.

“Curse?”

“Curse.” His voice resounded, quelling whatever doubts I may have had about mishearing. The voice was as measured as earlier.

“What do you mean by a curse?”

“Just what the word means.” He was sure. The eyes looked straight ahead without any expectation of a reaction.

The Yum Yum Years

Chapter 1



Circa 2003

On the face of it, it was a publishing company. Operatively, it was in the business of manufacturing semi- (sometimes entirely) plagiarised non-fiction books with the sole objective of yielding maximum profits. At the core of this ignoble foundation was fat-bellied Lalaji, who would have been more suited to a Daryaganj address—the hub of publishing companies—but chose to have his start-up in a New Delhi suburb, where finding 100 eligible people in the vicinity was a challenge in itself.

Lalaji had undertaken many challenges to set up an organisation that could house about 200 employees of versatile skillset and personalities. Even at the embryonic stage of his start-up, he could not have imagined the kind of chaos he was about to unleash. What's more, he and I, until now, could not have imagined such chaos succeeding. That is, until it ended for me. Before I talk about the end, let me say, as I often like to, let's begin with the beginning.

It was a Friday morning during an April that was beginning to swelter. I was firmly seated on my revolving chair in a rectangular cabin that could barely accommodate two at a time. Despite this, it still had enough space for more than a hundred books that zigzagged on and around

an antique-looking wooden desk, and an assembled PC that was home to a number of pirated software. The size of that cabin, I think, could not have been more than 10x5 feet. How I managed to accommodate myself in that confined space still amazes me. But then, those were the busy, the chaotic, the passionate, the hungry, the absorbing days... and of course, nights.

The red-coloured phone with a fading MTNL impression rang.

“What’s the status of the Indian mythology series? The client is putting pressure on me now! He wants to send it to print by Sunday.”

“Sunday?” I let out a controlled growl, “But we are not even halfway through it yet! There are a total of 100 titles and it’s already Friday! Even if I stretch the editorial team beyond their tested limit, there would hardly be any time for the layout.”

Lalaji, however, loved nothing more than to set unreal deadlines in a curiously calm tone. “Three days from today I want you to be in the middle of the next project, *beta*,” he said, speaking slowly. The pauses between his words made it evident that he had casually consumed a mouthful of *gutka* while I complained with considerable conviction. To give you a coherent perspective, Lalaji was a *gutka* addict. In fact, it was something like a compulsion for him. A plastic dustbin that was kept right next to his king-sized chair acted as a spittoon, dedicated as it was for the sole purpose of catching the spray of *gutka* from his mouth. So synonymous was Lalaji with *gutka* that his enclosed and tinted cabin was

perennially clouded with the fetid smell. My colleagues and I spent plenty of time feeling tortured while we sat enclosed in that cabin, forced to inhale the unsavoury scent as we took down briefs for new projects.

Lalaji was such a ferocious personality that none dared revolt against the invisible mist he created around himself. He was so loud and boisterous that it was common for him to be hurling ‘mother-sister’ abuses at employees at high enough decibels for the whole office to hear what was being said within the tinted cabin walls, converting private reprimands into full on public hearings. If you wonder why the glass walls were tinted, I’ll leave that to your imagination... for now. The opaque walls hid a man of about 32 years of age—though his early start in life and many business worries left him looking much older. His head still clung on to the last few sprigs of hair, all curling black, dangling carelessly on his nape, and his huge body was intimidating even in its most innocent postures.

Lalaji’s red mouth, always dripping with the cascading liquid, was topped with a black moustache that made him resemble something close to a well-trimmed walrus. His thick fingers, sometimes tapping the table when in a jolly mood, keeping time with the music that played in his inaccessible head, sparkled with multicoloured rocks that were meant to tame unfavourable planetary movements. Lalaji, who spoke with high-pitched entrepreneurial fervour and mannerisms that would have corporate soft skills trainers running for cover, dressed rather smartly in business formals on weekdays and Color Plus casuals on weekends.

On my first day at work, when I heard him continuously demanding sex with one employee's mother, I was shocked and wondered what on earth that employee, who was fondly addressed as Doctor Sa'ab, had done to invite such anger. Later, I discovered that Doctor Sa'ab, a 5'2", lean, Pagemaker expert, had failed to meet a dreaded deadline.

After witnessing a few such incidents, it had been hammered into my brain that missing a deadline was an unforgivable sin in such a draconian outfit. Luckily, I enjoyed more humane treatment than Doctor Sa'ab and my other coworkers. I was well aware of my privileged position, and my conscience exhorted me to outperform myself every day. In two years I had grown to be Lalaji's blue-eyed boy, who regularly enjoyed salary hikes, perks, and exclusive privileges that were normally conferred on employees after several years of hard work, sincerity, and the all-sacred loyalty.

Still, during my first month at work, Lalaji had tried to savage me completely, in accordance with the rituals of the tribe. To this, my young, pride-laden blood revolted. Lalaji was unaccustomed to uprisings of any volume but, shrewd businessman that he was, he simply smiled at me and extended a diplomatic apology. At the same time, he stressed upon the fact that he took the liberty to whip the verbal lash at me only because I was looked upon as a younger brother rather than a regular employee – and there's no arguing with the fact that a younger brother can be lashed and flogged at the elder's whim, more out of concern than the kind of antagonism that might prevail between boss and employee.

Chapter 2



The variety of people I met at Lalaji's organisation I was unlikely to encounter anywhere else. Doctor Sa'ab was the most amusing to begin with. The very name sketches before me the picture of a drained and bespectacled face, with a small head settled on a very fragile body, so beaten in appearance that it seemed even the most famine-ridden could defeat him in physical combat. Why he was called Doctor Sa'ab was not exactly known. According to organisation legend, he once prescribed medicine to a sick colleague. Upon consuming the medicine, the colleague was miraculously cured from his ailment, which was threatening to become chronic. Due to the profuse gratitude the colleague extended, people around, in their lust for jest, rechristened the prescriber Doctor Sa'ab.

At times I thought about how I would feel had I been given such a mocking title. The hurt for me would be two-fold, as I had actually set out to be a doctor during the course of my senior secondary education. But fate had something else stored for me. That 'something else' I have stopped chasing.

Doctor Sa'ab received his title rather well. In fact, he enjoyed the name and fame. Commonly, seniors refrain from calling out nicknames to their subordinates but, in this case, there was absolutely no discrimination. Such was the

charm of the title. Even Doctor Sa'ab's seniors were liberal in the usage. In fact, half the people in the office did not know Doctor Sa'ab's real name, and even if they had known it, they conveniently forgot it with time-induced amnesia. In love or hate, Doctor Sa'ab was Doctor Sa'ab.

Right at the corner of the building where our office was located, there was a juice shop, an *adda* for all of us boys to hang out in the evening. Since the cigarette-smoking population of the organisation had increased, the shop owner began stocking all brands of cigarettes, Indian and international. When the winters approached, he overstocked his rusty racks with Gudang Garam, the Indonesian cigarette with a distinct flavour of clove. What sets Gudang Garam apart is that it lasts three times longer than a normal cigarette, hence allowing office-goers to extend their *sutta* break. Amid the aroma of fresh fruit juices and intoxicating tobacco, all the office-wallahs, mainly men, lined up to talk and smoke. Everyone exchanged pleasantries irrespective of hierarchy and their love, hate, or neutrality toward one another. All the groups chatted away, the topics varying from the very popular ones, like who's going out with whom, to popular ones, like politics, to moderately popular, like family lives, to less popular, like project status. The chatter of small groups was so constant and uniform that, when all of them headed back to office together, there was an eerie silence under the tin roof which extended outside the juice shop. The constant chatter could only be disrupted by one thing – when an overly glamorous, pretty, or scarcely-dressed maiden trespassed the territory of lusty sniffers. All

heads turned and everyone respected each other's need for a visual feast. Some eyes used to widen, some shrank, some transfixed, some plain lusty, some so sharp that you felt they could penetrate through the maiden's dress. Once the party had passed, everyone turned and continued on with their respective topics, picking up right where they had left off, as if time had frozen for a few moments. I will not lie at this moment and say that I never joined that act of shame. You will learn that I am not as saintly as I may seem.

Well, let me move on.

One such evening, when I was puffing away at a Marlboro Lights in the sheltered area of the juice shop, I chanced upon Doctor Sa'ab, whose long-running loyalty to Gold Flake remained unshakable. I only witnessed him indulging in the more international Camel—which, I discovered later, was a 'duty free' gift from Lalaji after he returned from the Bologna Children's Book Fair—once. Doctor Sa'ab and I were not really what you would term 'close friends'. He worked in a different part of the office, while I rarely got out of my cabin (with the exception of my regular trips to the editorial room), even during lunchtime. I had always greeted Doctor Sa'ab with respect, as he was about eight years older than me, even though I was senior in hierarchy. But, since Doctor Sa'ab was not in my department, the hierarchical difference never existed between us. In fact, I respected him for his grey hair.

That evening, I was puffing away on my white stick all alone, my thoughts primarily set upon the pending tasks and, maybe, on a wobbly relationship that would do its

time in the next few months. In the spring of youth, my mind worked overtime.

Doctor Sa'ab noticed me from a distance. As he approached with his small and quick strides, his eyes crinkling with a heavy smile, I hurriedly let the smoke out of the left side of my mouth. It was my way of showing respect to elders. I would often just hold my cigarette and not puff while speaking to an elder or anyone worth a shred of respect. The thinking of a young mind.

“So, how are you doing, *sirji?*” asked the now fully-grinning Doctor Sa'ab. As usual, he was letting his excitement show. I was not to deny the semi-comic relief he would offer me.

“I am doing well Doctor Sa'ab? What is the latest?” I replied almost customarily.

“Well, we are family people, with a life that cycles around work-home-work. It's at your age that adventures beckon every night.”

For a moment I actually tried to recall if I had any adventures or misadventures to share. Unfortunately, my work-home-work cycle was more rigid than family-centred Doctor Sa'ab's. Quite embarrassed not to have any youthful *masala* tales to share, I grimaced, “You know Doctor Sa'ab, the work pressure here is too immense. Unsurprisingly, there is a tight delivery deadline this weekend. No marks for guessing that weekend is working too. The team was disappointed, but I have pepped them up.”

Doctor Sa'ab had scored a strong puff while listening carefully to my beaten-to-death tale. Holding a serious

face, he spoke in a low voice, as if about to disclose a top classified secret, “Sirji, this deadline is all fake. The fact is that Lalaji just wants to make more money, faster.” He took a pause. My guess is to quickly calculate the amount of money Lalaji would make on the ongoing project. Then, he continued, widening his eyes behind his glasses, “We are all washerman’s asses here. We work 12 hours a day, seven days a week, and Lalaji milks money from us. You don’t know, sirji, he made a killing in the last project. I was with him when he was quoting the rate to the client. Lalaji usually doesn’t share the rate with anyone in the company. But at that time, he had to share the rate in my presence because the client wanted an estimate then and there. After Lalaji had quoted, he looked at me and his eyes clearly signalled me not to share the rates with anyone. But you are my special friend sir, and a well-wisher.”

I was sure that Lalaji’s eyes must have threatened him, not signalled. I knew exactly how Lalaji would have looked, and how Doctor Sa’ab might just have peed a few drops in his knee-length *kachcha*. How I know about Doctor Sa’ab’s undergarments is another story. All of us had once made a trip to the Himalayan town of Manali, where Doctor Sa’ab used to, quite famously, take his pants off during the night and sleep comfortably in a striped *kachcha*. It is yet another story that every night someone used to pull the strings of his *kachcha* so that, when Doctor Sa’ab woke up the next morning and stood, stretching his arms upwards, he was exposed in full view. Everyone, hardly being able to stick to the social code, laughed their unclean intestines out. The

culprit could never be found, despite Doctor Sa'ab hurling abuses at the invisible mischief-maker, challenging him to come forth.

And now, here was Doctor Sa'ab, leaking Lalaji's well-guarded secrets to me. It was clear to me that he could not risk gossiping about this with anyone else, but he couldn't safely keep it aside in his memory either.

I smiled awkwardly at him, realising my cigarette had grown shorter with a long tail of smouldering ash about to fall. I tipped the butt to let gravity absorb the ashes in its infinite grasp. Doctor Sa'ab was looking wide-eyed at me, expecting a shell-shocked expression on my face. I was quite diplomatic in such situations, even if I was usually myself with Doctor Sa'ab. I knew that Lalaji was a shrewd businessman. I also knew that he rewarded those who worked hard to make his semi-plagiaristic business work.

"That's how business works, Doctor Sa'ab. More revenue also means the company will grow, hence its employees. We should be happy that the company is making more money."

Disappointed at this gossip-killing argument, Doctor Sa'ab made a matter-of-fact and out of turn remark, "Sirji, you can say that. You get a hike in your pay every second month. You grow with the company. Others don't." It was a statement laden with jealousy that reflected on Doctor Sa'ab's small face. His grin gave way to a sullen expression that soon neutralised as he realised the awkwardness of the moment. He was clearly displeased with the organisation. To be fair, his rate of monetary increment was rather poor compared to some of the others on Lalaji's payroll. These

increments were decided randomly and based totally on Lalaji's whims and calculations – calculations that he claimed were not learned, but inherent skills.

Doctor Sa'ab's disappointment made sense to me. He was a family man. I was a footloose youngster whose entire salary was dispensable pocket money that made ego and arrogance swell. For Doctor Sa'ab, half his salary was his children's school fee, a good percentage went towards ration and household chores, and whatever was left was directed towards maintaining his daily quota of tobacco and an efficient but ailing Bajaj Super scooter. When Doctor Sa'ab expressed his jealousy, more than getting offended, I felt pity. During my years at Lalaji's company, my most depressing and trying moments were when I witnessed young, small-town boys (rarely were there girls) arriving in Delhi, dreaming of building flourishing careers and earning lots of money. They earned barely enough to afford a crumbling, shared room on a sun-soaked terrace in some ill-maintained locality. Some of them kept as little as Rs. 100 aside for a rainy day. Borrowing from their more fortunate seniors in denominations of 10 and 100 was common for them. I often ended up lending money to such colleagues, but ceased when I realised I was bad at asking for it back. And when a borrower turned his back when he saw me coming his way, I felt even smaller – not because I had permanently parted with my hard-earned and somewhat dispensable cash, but because I had been ignored. However, in a way, it gave me relief to see that agony was not exclusive, but shared by one and all.

In that borrowing culture, Doctor Sa'ab was the one with steely pride. As far as I know, he never borrowed or even yearned for an advance salary, which was the norm in Lalaji's organisation. Because more than 80 per cent of the company comprised lowly-paid artists or Pagemaker experts, many accused the company of 'people exploitation'. For me, it was an unfair accusation, and I often reacted by saying, "If they are worth more, why do they work here?" My practical argument had few takers in a highly emotional workplace.

That evening, Doctor Sa'ab bid me adieu a little disappointed. I could see that he was crestfallen but, at the same time, quite content to let the troubling gossip flush out of his system, even if the response had not built the uplifting conversation he had hoped for. It was obvious to me that, in a space of five minutes, Doctor Sa'ab would once again be in his own familiar and transcendental state of page layouts.

As for me, having hardly taken two puffs that evening, I made my way upstairs. A long weekend lay before me and my team, and I had to harangue them and remain inspired in appearance myself. I started to rehearse the theatrics in my head as I stepped closer to the theatre that had become my home.

Chapter 3



Lalaji's company was not just a workplace for me, it was a fertile fishing ground. On some nights the moon shone gentler, more poetic, in a way that attracted romance. In such times, and at the age of 22, hyperactive with sexual energy, I often set my eyes upon the most sought after fish in a fast-filling pond. I remember with ease the first who made an impression on me, the first I attained.

She was the grey-eyed, fair-skinned Akanksha, or desire, an administration officer at Lalaji's company. Given her hypnotising face and slight arrogance (a trait that so often makes the most desired the most inaccessible and, in turn, making them even more desirable), men of all ages and departments longed for her, either discreetly or in permissible juice shop forums. Well-aware that she was longed for, Akanksha chose to maintain a distance, and kept men yearning for rare personal attention. Akanksha had joined Lalaji's company when I was relatively new to the ranks and was working my way up the echelons. It was hard not to notice Akanksha when she first arrived. I was instantly trapped. Lalaji's sources or, perhaps, his own acute senses, noticed this in a few days. Unfortunately, the tight leash Lalaji had me on, ensured that I did not chase the new damsel in his dominion at the cost of sacred work duties.

Akanksha too did not fail to notice me. On her first day at the company, it so happened that Lalaji was away on an official tour. Due to the chaotic structure that had existed for so long, no immediate boss was assigned to the new employee. Akanksha settled uncomfortably in the small reception area on one of the black metallic chairs that were lined up along the wall, waiting anxiously for someone to guide her to her workstation, which of course no one had bothered to assign.

As time passed, no one arrived to rescue Akanksha, even though she attracted plenty of attention. All the men, even those with the urge to assist, restrained themselves on two accounts: first, a lack of confidence to attend to the hottest woman they had ever seen outside of a television screen. Second, even if they had the courage, with no place for Akanksha to work, there was no real solution to the problem.

In the swarm of silent confusion, I sensed an opportunity and caved, falling into the chasm of irresistible seduction. When I noticed the angel-eyed Akanksha seated desolately, the object of fascination for many lecherous eyes in the busy reception area, I went up to her and introduced myself as the editorial lead.

Akanksha, who had her eyes fixed on the floor after being the subject of a thousand stares, looked up. It was in that frozen moment that I first looked deep into her eyes. At close range, and after closer introspection, it was safe to conclude that they were green-grey – a rarity and symbol of the exotic... in this part of the world at least.

I knew instantly that I was smitten. Akanksha had won my loyalty and unsolicited assistance for the day. Though I was in a serious relationship at the time, I knew that morals and principles were impotent voices in the background. The pull of visual beauty in full force banishes the wholesome willpower that might have been your source of sturdiness hitherto, forcing you to unwittingly conform to the ageless laws of seduction.

In such a moment, I was jolted out of my meditative state, and the mind weaved together many perfect justifications in many split seconds, allowing me to indulge and be morally unbound.

Upon learning that Akanksha had been waiting endlessly for someone to welcome her, I made a call to Lalaji, who had unsurprisingly and conveniently, forgotten the new employee's joining date. His voice, heavy from the previous evening's generous dose of scotch, ordered me to take the lost dove under my wings for the next two days until his arrival. Disbelieving yet happy, I accepted Lalaji's orders.

When the solemn young lady learned that she would be walking the tricky and unprecedented ropes of editorial, she was taken aback. Her expression turned grim. Had I not immediately informed her that the arrangement was only for two days, I can now confidently say that a tear would have slipped out of those green-grey eyes, and only divinity can answer how I would have resisted to embrace the damsel in distress. A thing of beauty becomes a masterpiece of desire when holy sadness strikes at the centre of its emotional fountain.

Akanksha and I settled into my rather queer wooden-walled cabin (this was before I had my so-called private 10x5 cabin) that gave the illusion of being pentagonal. In those years, I shared my cabin space with Mahesh, most un-interfering of fellows. That day, however, even he could not help noticing the beauty that had set foot in this office that, by and large, consisted of sex-starved unmarried youth. Mahesh was in his mid-thirties and had vowed to remain a bachelor till his three unmarried sisters found their soulmates. Even someone making a sacrifice of this legendary nature could not help hold back his awestruck look. Akanksha, noticing Mahesh's gaze, must have wondered whether he suffered from some kind of inexplicable fixation disorder, or perhaps she was aware of the effect that she had on men.

Her head was held a bit low, like a coy bride growing accustomed to a new household. With covert scrutiny, her eyes wandered as she lifted her head a tad bit, quite naturally appearing startled. Mahesh and I treated our space like an unsupervised bachelor pad. Mahesh's reference books, drawing sheets, boards, and brushes lay everywhere, ready to fly in any direction with the slightest gust of wind. My reference books lay unorganised, and fresh packs of manuscripts in fresh brown envelopes gave it a messy look that would make a scholar proud and a homemaker frown.

Akanksha would quietly accept the disorder as a part of this alien territory that she had stepped into. She sat on a cheap armless chair that Lalaji had reserved for visitors. Mahesh remained like a statue, his brush suspended in his right hand, quite a distance from the drawing sheet that

rested on the table. I distracted Mahesh with a frown and a soft hiss. His normalcy restored, he shyly turned away, picking up the portrait from where he had left off. Mahesh was hard of hearing, which would work to my advantage that day. I was not pleased to have him around, but the continuous gravitational pull of attraction had slipped the thought of Mahesh's unsavoury presence into my subconscious mind.

Mahesh's little comic theatrics seemed to amuse Akanksha despite her visible disorientation. I was to later learn that she had joined Lalaji's mess from a big, system-oriented MNC. She could not fathom a young and unlikely editorial head welcoming an administration officer. She was still coming to terms with the fact that, in a company of more than 200 employees, there wasn't a single HR executive. She would, however, soon learn the nature of the company and get accustomed to our unorganised but prudent way of working. At that time, I was least concerned about her emotions toward the workplace. My heart rate had shattered all previous records, even faster than the time I had experienced my first kiss.

Akanksha's green-grey eyes were a bit more settled now, sporting a look of relief and, if I read it right, a sudden shade of excitement. Her white shirt, buttoned to her chest just above the fading line of her cleavage, complemented her fair skin well. Her black pants were tight and curved well over her bottom. I instantly thought of all the lusty men in the office who must have stared unabashedly at that bottom during her march to my cabin and the events preceding it.

I feared they would ogle her further to stimulate their cheap selves, but halted my disturbing thoughts there. Akanksha kept her hair straight that day, and it fell down to her upper back. A fading pink sat on her cheeks.

After the ten-minute love storm that hit me, I finally and consciously gathered some sense. In fact, a voice inside me awakened to the fact that I could not give away my lovelorn state right in the beginning. Mentally shaking myself to return to normalcy, I asked Akanksha, “Would you like tea or coffee?” That was hardly normal, I realised, as that was treatment usually reserved for a big-ticket client in Lalaji’s company. Akanksha, now getting accustomed to the unusual ambience, looked straight at me, her green-greys glinting more now with the delight of extended courtesy, “No, thank you. But I would like to have some water.”

The eyes that reflected gratitude and familiarity glistened further, communicating a friendly and reluctant glance, only heightening my urge to hold her. She was now looking straight into my eyes. Her tender look seemed to say that I was her only friend in a strange land, her only Man Friday, her only saviour. Removing myself from the gripping eye-lock, I moved to my right to get hold of a Bisleri bottle placed on my side desk. I poured water into a disposable plastic glass, all the while half-attentive, and held it out to the thirsty divinity.

That was the first time I saw Akanksha smile – her eyes glinting like a cosmic expansion, her cheeks inflated like an angelic avatar, her tiny teeth like a neat row of pearls. I could have written an impromptu piece of poetry. She

smiled right at me, and whispered a tender thank you. She consumed water in small sips until the glass was reduced to half its capacity.

“Thank you for making me feel better. I was almost lost,” she said as if replenished by water.

“Now that you have found your feet, I still need to find your seat and figure out what work to give you,” I remarked.

Her reply, “That investigation, I leave to you. I have found my seat for the time being,” gave away too much, or maybe I gathered more than what was aired.

That she said “I have found my seat for the time being” meant that she was to spend more time with me, she was comfortable in my company now, she was past her initial shock of Lalaji’s company’s culture, she was trusting me to investigate for her, she was...she was... the explosion of multiple possibilities along with a million dreams happened in a split second, and probably shot a million more chemicals into my bloodstream.

Relieved at the various positive connotations of a statement that could have been frivolously uttered at the spur of the moment, I found myself playing on the next level of flirtation. “Ah! Ma’am, I have more and better things to do than find a workstation for someone whose joining is not even worth remembering.” There was a grin on my face, wide enough.

“So what shall I make of the gesture that you are going out of your way to help a stranded new employee?”

That statement could be perceived many ways, and showed that Akanksha was (or appeared to be) a seasoned

flirt. This would have usually been a put off for me, as I enjoyed chasing girls. Those that came in too easily...well, did not excite me. Another inference could be that she was innocently enjoying this flirtatious game of words. I settled for the latter.

“Well, I’ll leave that to your interpretation – rather, investigations,” I said, retaining my mischievous smile. Akanksha grinned back at me, exposing her pearly teeth and the spark in her green-greys once more. Before she could remark, I excused myself to find a workstation for her in the cluttered office. I did that purposely because I did not want to drain all my flirting in a day. It was just the beginning and I wanted to leave her a bit wanting as well.

As I walked around my table, out of the cabin—all to the amazement of Mahesh, who was still reeling from the sudden shock of beauty—I could feel Akanksha’s green-greys follow me out. Looking ahead, I stepped out with the image of her red nail paint imprinted on my mind’s eye.

In a matter of fifteen minutes, I was done with my investigations, and Akanksha found her workstation, thanking me once again. I allocated her an odd job that was rather difficult in nature, doing so on purpose as it would require her to come to me frequently with questions that I could gently guide her around.

It was a relatively smooth day for Akanksha after a rough beginning. I would not be lying at this point if I said that I was more than mesmerised. After all, I was all of 22 at the time; how could I resist possibly the most beautiful encounter of any kind? As I had foreseen, Akanksha had

trouble settling into her new role, and her frequent knocks on my cabin door—which was never closed—continued throughout the day.

She knocked with a smile, head slightly tilted, strands of hair falling away from her cheek. I would notice her approach through the corner of my eye, but would look up at her with complete innocence at the sound of her knuckles colliding on my glass door.

“Oh! Here you are again. Tell me, where you are stuck?” I said about ten times in ten different ways that day. Every visit that day was marked with undertones of flirting. With her each visit, she was beginning to get more comfortable with me, and I was gaining more confidence. Every time her coloured eyes trapped mine, my heart pumped harder. Manoj stayed transfixed, his pale yellow teeth flashing against his dusky skin every time Akanksha made an appearance.

When the day reached its end, Akanksha arrived to bid me good bye and thank me, once again, for helping her out. My confidence and comfort had swollen so much that I got up to escort her outside the office building. We talked about our families, siblings, interests, work, schools... we parted that day as friends. For me, that was just the beginning. By the time I walked her to her car, the stars had swallowed the bright sun and scattered themselves across a night sky that did not have even a wisp of a cloud. The pleasant monsoon breeze was tantalisingly unsettling her hair, making it look messier than its neat, straightened look from earlier.

In the dimly lit parking area, her eyes sparkled at me, piercing the darkness of night, right into my hungry heart.

Those green-greys had a queerness about them – the kind of queerness that you just know, when sad, could bring a kingdom down around its king’s ears. The kind of sadness that must have been responsible for the wars of the past, maybe that of Troy itself. It was the kind of sadness you want to see, solely to be able to hold and console the soul that felt it. Nothing produces love more powerfully in a man than the sight of a distressed woman with eyes that can reflect *that* kind of sadness. I yearned for her sad eyes as my crippled soul said goodbye to her.

I know that love sequences can get redundant beyond a point. So I will break the momentum here. Akanksha and my romance is not significant beyond this point. It was like spring. It came, blossomed, and withered away. With time, Akanksha had become fond of me, even romanced me while she had a steady relationship. Well, she was not the only unscrupulous one. I was just as unethical, and what some might label a cheat. But then that’s what everybody does to us. They judge and label us. Upon the expiry of a satisfactory evaluation, they re-judge and re-label us.

The truth is that I was in an ageing relationship at the time. It had it seen its spring, summer, and fall. As with quite a few lovers in their early twenties, my relationship did not have a future. She was affluent, I was middle-class; she was demanding, I was not giving; she was rational in the right places, while I was emotional in the wrong places. In hindsight, I craved to spend my life with her, but that the union never was to be is perhaps the best thing that happened to me.

Lalaji's company had been the game changer in my relationship with Tanya, my steady girlfriend of four years. Before Lalaji's company happened, as an unemployed, energetic young man, my days and nights were dedicated to Tanya. She dominated, I gave in; she called the shots, I enacted; she decided the time, I caved; she pulled, I ambled along. Lalaji's organisation was a slap in my face, a different world. While my allegiance towards Tanya was never threatened, my conscience was definitely altered to fit the tune that my senses always understood better. It was a tune that, however briefly, had me leaving behind man-made morals purely to suit my own convenience.

I also suspect that Tanya had her own liaisons during those years. They were always conveniently overlooked and quietly forgiven – so strong was my desire to be with her. So deep was the need, so hollow was the void.