

PROLOGUE



‘So, where’s she now?’ I prepared coffee for him as he sat on the couch. We never kept secrets from each other because we knew even if everyone else fails to understand us, we’d still be by each other’s side. There’s something special about college friends, isn’t it? You don’t really need to explain yourself, you are not required to think even for a second before uttering nonsense in front of them because the best part is they never judge you.

It’s been about a year since Arnav and I met. We were at my home in Kolkata as he had just returned from Bangalore. He was on a one month leave from Siemens.

‘I don’t really have an idea,’ I said, avoiding eye contact.

‘But didn’t you try meeting her after college?’ he asked as he sipped his coffee.

‘Why would I? She won’t even talk to me! Why would I when I know things won’t work out between us?’

I was in no mood of explaining things to him; moreover, I just didn’t want to spare any moment thinking about her. Though the scenario was completely different, the truth was

that I spent my nights staring at the pictures of our annual function from final year, even though she wasn't there in any of them & I never know why! I often check if she's on Facebook, but social media was never her thing. Maybe that was why I didn't have any clue about her whereabouts. I could have asked Arnav or anyone else from her class to know where exactly she was, but then I knew it won't make any difference.

'Rehaan, get over her at least! Find yourself a girl, guys like you don't deserve to stay single. So many girls were interested in you during college, and you never looked at anyone. At least give yourself a second chance you can't be this way for your whole life!'

I never got to know what made Arnav think that I was popular amongst girls. If I were to describe myself, I'd just say that I was a guy with messy, long hair, taller than usual, with a slightly fair complexion. I was obsessed with a black bracelet and two rings on my index finger and thumb of my right hand. Just like every other guitarist you'd ever come across. The only change I could visualise about me was that I had grown a well-shaped beard over the years.

I wasn't someone with extraordinary abilities that would attract people. Maybe just because of the fact that I loved playing the guitar he assumed that I was liked by every other girl I came across and I feel he's totally wrong.

I didn't reply as I stared at Dad's picture hanging on the sidewall, his smile still made me feel proud of him, he is my hero. Dad used to tell me how he met mom and how he never thought that they would ever get married. Arnav didn't say anything as he came up and hugged me just because he heard something I wasn't able to put in words.

'C'mon! Cheer up let's just go and have tea at our forever place!' he suggested. I nodded and followed him out of my room.

‘So how’s life out there?’ I asked as we started walking down the street outside my house.

‘Life is amazing! But you know nothing can ever match the thrill and excitement of our college days, isn’t it?’

We reached and sat on the bench, the tea stall was about 5 minutes away from our colony, and it was our permanent place to hang out since our high school days. It had been months since we visited there and the shopkeeper smiled as soon as he spotted us together and told us that it’s been about a year since he saw us.

I smiled back at him as Arnav started searching for something on his phone.

‘Hey! Look what I got,’ he jumped in excitement as he directed his phone screen at me.

‘These are from our first year’s first mass bunk, aren’t they?’ I was shocked at how young and innocent we all looked back then. Most of the boys were beardless, with ties around their neck hugging their collar’s. We were all yet to experience real engineering life. Those pictures seemed like they were clicked ages ago.

‘Just look at you! How hilarious you looked back then,’ I laughed as he swiped.

‘Fuck off dude, you didn’t look like a Hollywood star either!’ and we got busy remembering the names of the people in those pictures and the nicknames we had decided for each and every one of them.

He continued swiping the pictures, I came across the one which had her and me in it. He kept on swiping all of them, but I just couldn’t take myself out of that one and only picture of hers, with me holding a cup of tea. That one picture triggered all the memories I was trying to escape from...

UNDYING MEMORIES



June 2013, it was about a week since our college started, a renowned engineering institute in Mumbai and I had finally made it there. There are still moments when I wonder why did I choose engineering? But then who cares, more than half of the people around me were clueless about it, and how can you even call it engineering life if you're sure of exactly what you want to do with your life ahead?

What can be better than having your childhood best friend throughout this journey of Engineering right by your side? Arnav was placed in the same college, and that meant we'd have some more years to insult each other, laugh over the silliest things ever, roam around this beautiful city aimlessly during nights and make memories that would last forever. I can't forget meeting him on the first day of school. He was crying over his mom's lap and pleading her to not leave him alone, while I stared at him for a moment and ended up crying even more. He was the scholar type, every teacher's favourite, famous amongst all the girls of our batch but was always too busy flirting with his books. I

never met someone who had that magic to drag him out of the overweighed books he used to read back then, till this girl called Ishita got transferred to our school in the eighth standard.

She was beautiful and ideal for my best friend. No spectacles hanging on her nose, long skirt, or always lost in her books. Arnav used to stare at her during our classes through the corner of his eyes, sacrificed his 1 mark during the tests so she'd be able to top in it (trust me it's too much for a guy like him) but never told her about his feelings. A year later, in the middle of our ninth class session, she had to change the city and left. That was the first time I saw him crying over a girl but not on how the teacher deducted his marks without any reason. Our friendship grew over the years and turned stronger while he was struggling to get over Ishita though I never left his side whenever he wished to talk about it.

Just the way I was there for him through his hard times, he never skipped a chance reminding me that I should start studying whenever exams approached us. He helped me in completing all my assignments and dealing with those extra complicated mathematics problems. I used to give up on myself, but he never did, he kept on forcing me to study harder, and I think that made him my parent's favourite child. Honestly, I hated that part of him with all my heart.

We had only one commitment, 'Rule the Back Benches' and we were doing the same here as well. We were planning something interesting to do as we had just completed a full week of boring lectures and staring blindly at the faces of our professor's. It was our 3rd lecture just before the lunch break when Arnav whispered:

'Let's plan a mass bunk!'

I wasn't yet convinced about the idea because we still didn't know our classmates. It had been merely a week. I

was kind of sure that no-one would agree for a mass bunk and that too so early in the session.

‘Do you think people would agree? I don’t think so!’ I whispered.

‘Let’s just give it a try, I think there’s a slight chance they would agree to it.’

I nodded as we waited for the lecture to end.

As the lecturer walked out of the class, Arnav closed the door and asked everyone to quiet down. I walked towards the podium and said,

‘Guys, can I have your attention?’

I tried to be as loud as I could. Everyone stared at me, blindly as if they had never seen me before. The first bencher’s faces started turning awkward, and I could sense people gossiping about how I looked and how ripped my jeans were. But I ignored everything as I continued speaking,

‘Guys, we are planning a mass bunk today, like immediately after the lunch break. All we have been doing since last week is attending lectures endlessly, and I think we should try to know each other a bit more. This would freshen up our minds and help us create a bond. So if you all are ready, let’s just make it happen!’

I was waiting for them to respond. Everyone was in a deep conversation within themselves, and I stood there waiting for everyone to come to a decision.

As I was busy discussing the chances of this plan being denied by nearly everyone in the class with Arnav, I noticed a girl standing up and walking towards me. She came up and stood beside me, catching every single guy’s attention.

‘I’m Shivani, and I totally agree with Rehaan. I think we should make this happen as it will help us get to know each other well, whoever agrees with me can just come up and join us out here.’

She was adorable, the way her brown hair went straight in the start and turned slightly wavy at the ends, her lipstick matching her red top and those skin-tight black jeans were making her look even more pretty. Her light brown eyes matched her hairs perfectly, and I kept looking at them for a few seconds. She was just one of the girls I would reject myself for, every guy wishes to have someone like her. She was bold, confident to the point where cuteness and hotness entangle completely.

I was still in a state of shock. Firstly it was tough to believe she knew my name. Why would she pay attention during attendance to know my name? And secondly, the way she spoke, everyone seemed lost. I saw Arnav staring at her without even blinking his eyes for a second. I pinched Arnav as she was done delivering her small, mesmerising speech.

To be very honest, her voice seemed like sweet, melodious and perfectly crafted lyrics of a song one couldn't resist losing themselves within. And it worked amazingly well, within moments we had more than half of the class besides us. I was yet to thank her when Arnav whispered in my ear,

'Bro, how could she know your name? I'm literally jealous of you right now.'

'Maybe, she isn't interested in scholars like you!' I laughed.

'Hey, Rehaan thanks for this.'

I heard the same voice again. Yes, it was Shivani standing right behind me while everyone was busy planning of how special this mass bunk was going to be.

'Thanks for what? I think I should thank you for convincing everyone,' I smiled at her.

'Maybe, but the plan was all yours, so credit goes to you!' she replied.

'Well, can I ask you something?'

'Of course, yes!' she replied instantly.

'How did you know my name?' I asked curiously.

'Well, maybe I think I should know you a bit more, Rehaan,' she said flirtatiously.

I turned nervous, I didn't know how to react. And I guess she saw right through me. I was suddenly nervous.

'It's alright! Don't worry, it was just a joke.'

I smiled as she got busy in discussing the mass bunk with one of her friend's.

I checked on the people who were still denying the mass bunk and were seated on their respective benches. As I had expected, there was a group of first benchers who were still engrossed in their books and were least concerned about what was going on in the class. But, opposite to my expectations, I saw a few girls seated at their benches, and they all seemed unconvinced about our plan.

Amongst them was Aisha, the cutest girl anyone could ever come across. Her beautifully embroidered light pink salwar, with matching dupatta was perfectly matching her pinkish skin tone. Her long straightened hair used to jump off their place and hide her left eye at times, and she would slowly place them back with the help of the pen she held in her hand. Her attire could easily beat any of the tops, t-shirts or jeans; the girls around her were wearing. That slight nervousness on her face, while she stared at the crowd around me for a fraction of seconds made her look prettier. Alright, I'm sorry if I get sidetracked way too much! But trust me, Aisha could easily distract anyone from anything and that too, without even trying. She was a kind of poem one just wants to read, re-read and drown beneath its deepness.

I was still lost in that cute fight amongst Aisha and her hairs while Arnav dragged me out of my thoughts.

‘What about those girls, aren’t they coming with us?’

That was when I realised that Aisha wasn’t ready to join us in the mass bunk, and that was enough to turn off my mood. I desperately wanted her to come so that I could have a chance to talk to her, which I was totally unsuccessful at since last week.

I can’t ever forget the day I saw her for the first time. Arnab and I were late for our very first lecture that day. We were rushing towards our class, blaming each other for getting up late. As we were about to enter the class, I heard the noise of something falling down on the floor right in front of the door of our class. It was a diary with a title on it: ‘Aisha’s Little World’ I leaned down to pick it up and returned it to the girl standing right in front of me. That was when I got to know her name.

Her long straight black hair covered her face as she tried leaning down to pick her diary up while noticing I already had it in my hand, she managed her hair, and I saw her for the very first time. Her eyes seemed like hiding a beautiful world within them, somewhere I wished to roam around and explore. The slight amount of Kohl applied around her eyes made them look prettier, the lines around her forehead were showing her restlessness. That small sparkling bindi on her forehead, slightly pointed nose and nearly everything about her seemed perfect. She was an angel, I wondered how she can be real? She was just extraordinarily beautiful. Her nervousness turned her cuter, while I was busy staring at the way she looked, she snatched away the diary from my hand and entered the class. I was still wondering about what was written in the diary and how can someone look so beautiful while Arnab dragged me in the class.

I captured that moment in my heart and kept on repeating it again. I knew it was love, I don’t know why

but I was sure about it though I had never been in love before. I had a few crushes in school, but with Aisha, things were different. It was just an instant realisation, a magical moment of a few seconds and that's it, I was in love! At least I felt so. It was an immediate storm of feelings entering my soul and making an impact that I knew was going to last forever!

It felt different, the way she looked at me and I suddenly looked away. I can clearly remember every little detail about her. This was totally new for me, I'd never felt like this for anyone ever before. But, the moment she glanced at me for a fraction of second, my heart skipped a beat. I could feel the intensity of my heartbeats turning faster, my nerves turned me even more conscious. I don't know if it was love or something else, but she had me glued to her at that moment. Even though it didn't last long, but that was enough to make me feel things I'd never felt in my life.

I had heard stories about how love happens suddenly when we least expect it. We just fall in it unknowingly, without thinking about the consequences. We keep on losing ourselves in it, more and more as time passes. We start noticing every small thing about the person we fall for. I think the biggest plot twist of our lives is that we don't get to control our feelings for someone. The toughest part of this all is when we have to hide our feelings from that person. The most beautiful yet sad thing about this one-sided love is that we start dreaming about things that won't ever happen & we start expecting so much out of it. Was I falling for her? Or was it just infatuation? What if I assume this as love and if it isn't? All these questions kept wandering around my mind & I didn't have an answer to any one of them.

As days passed, I started paying attention to the way Aisha used to dress up, the way she walked and the rarest

moments when she would smile at the jokes her friends would crack. I was in search of a reason to talk to her once. I just felt I should know her a bit more, she always seemed so busy doing one or the other work, which revealed how studious and serious she was when it came to academics. It was not even a week since our college had started and she used to read some 500 to 600 pages books on different topics whenever she would have free time, which made it more difficult for me to approach her. But this first mass bunk could be a perfect chance to have a conversation with her, which was only possible if she agreed to come with us.

I asked Shivani if she could convince those girls. She agreed and walked towards them. I crossed my fingers and started enchanting prayers in my mind so that Aisha would agree to come with us. Shivani talked with them for a few minutes after that I saw them get up and pack all their stuff. Aisha didn't seem too convinced, but still, she had to agree as the girls around her were finally ready. A smile surrounded my face as Shivani's magic had worked perfectly all-over again. So, finally, Aisha was here, with us, and nothing could make me happier.

I thanked Shivani as she smiled, and we all headed towards our canteen. We all bought some snacks and had lunch with us. We walked towards the garden near the mechanical building. We settled ourselves on the grass while Arnav started clicking pictures on his phone. Apart from being obsessed with books, he never failed to click pictures of whatever used to happen around him. He often used to force me for the photos and used to tell me, 'You're going to thank me later for clicking these.' He had every moment captured with him, pictures, videos of nearly all the special times we spent together. He believed that these memories needed to be captured and held on to, forever.

I was still checking Aisha's changed expression when I heard a noise, it was Shivani. She banged an empty bottle of Coca Cola to grab our attention.

'Guys! Let's play Truth and Dare, what say?' she asked in excitement. Everyone around me cheered up as we walked towards our garden area for the game to start. I was excited as well as a bit nervous too.

The bottle began to spin around us, and I was staring at it, with only one thought all-over my mind: Damn just don't let the bottle point at me! Amongst all the girls around me, my eyes were stuck on Aisha, she still seemed unconvinced about this plan. She was lost in something, something I was clueless about. How amazing it felt while staring at her without her eyes noticing me, I felt like drowning deep within her eyes. We were all strangers to each other, but still, I could sense some strong connection with Aisha, and I wasn't aware of the reason. I was totally into her and didn't even notice that the bottle stopped and was pointing towards Aisha and me.

Arnav yelled at me, 'Bro? Where the hell are you lost? It's your turn.'

It broke my series of thoughts, and I hesitated before uttering, 'Okay!'

Aisha asked slowly in her cute voice, 'Truth or Dare?'

Shit! What am I supposed to reply now? Truth is a better option, I guess. I purposely cleared my throat and tried to act as normal as I could, 'Truth' and then I noticed Shivani whispering something into Aisha's ear. I didn't know what that was, but it made me a bit curious. Aisha's expression changed suddenly, she turned a bit hesitant and was trying to deny what Aisha had just whispered in her ear. Shivani and other girls around her were forcing her to ask what they wanted her to.

Somehow with a low voice, she managed to ask me, 'Do...do you have any crush on someone in our class?'

I froze, it felt like my heartbeats doubled over time, and I was counting on each second. I was in the spotlight, and everyone was waiting for my answer. That was when Arnav jumped and scared me while I was lost and shouted, 'Reehan! What's there to think about it so much? Tell us, don't be nervous it's fine!'

He laughed as I just ignored what else Arnav had to say. I just took a deep breath, held it in and with a little smile on my face I said, 'Not yet! but maybe things could turn around soon?'

I noticed the sparkling smile on Shivani's face and the way she was blushing. Anyway, I was least concerned about her, but the thing that made my heart skip a beat was Aisha asking me about my crush, I was just replaying that moment in my head and smiling uncontrollably.

'Gosh! Stop it, stop acting like an idiot else you'll surely get slapped by her someday,' I heard a voice inside me.

'Okay, guys! Spin the bottle again,' Rohit, our elected Class representative, suggested.

When the second round of truth and dare was about to begin, I felt a few raindrops over my head. Everyone noticed that it could rain anytime and so we decided to head towards our respective rooms in the hostel.

So, it was officially over. Our first mass bunk held something I couldn't ever forget, and that was the question Aisha had asked me, it was just the best part of my day. That moment wasn't something I would get over anytime soon. Arnav and I shared the same room in our hostel, so we started walking together. Arnav asked me in a totally excited tone, 'So?'

'So, what?' I asked, trying to act normally.

‘Can you stop acting smart at least in front of me?’ Arnav sounded sarcastic.

‘When did I? You’re just overthinking!’ I tried to convince him.

‘Alright, then maybe I’ll ask Aisha!’ he smiled. He knew exactly the point where to attack me, maybe that was why we were so close to each other? Knowing each other’s heart was quite obvious.

I turned nervous while I finally agreed,

‘Okay, fine! Maybe I just like her. Don’t even dare to ask me the reason because even I don’t know why.’

He smiled and hugged me,

‘Do you even know how cute you look saying this, dude? I just can’t stop laughing!’

‘Whatever!’ I was irritated with Arnav for laughing over this thing. We were on our way back to the room when it started raining heavily. We ran and took cover under the cafeteria section.

‘Dude, this can’t be a coincidence!’ Arnav said excitedly.

‘What now? Will you stop teasing me?’ I replied in an irritating tone.

‘Aisha is standing there! Just look.’

I turned left to scan the faces around me. There she was irritated by the unexpected rain and waiting for it to stop. At times she put her right hand, which had a blue bracelet, out to see if the rain had stopped yet. Damn! Why was she so cute? Every time I saw her, everything disappeared.

‘Will you go? Or should I give you a push?’ asked Arnav, I was way too nervous to talk to her.

‘But, dude, I can’t! What will I say?’ I was getting more nervous each passing second.

‘Ask her for tea and start the conversation. Now fuck off from here, idiot! I’ll meet you later at the hostel.’

Arnav waved at me and joined another group of people out there. I was counting my steps. Every time I moved forward, I could feel Aisha closer to me, and that was turning me little more nervous. Each step felt like I covered more than a thousand miles and my breaths turned heavier. Finally, I was right in front of her, and she was yet to notice me.

‘Hi Aisha,’ I whispered slowly while she turned towards me with a smile.

‘Hey, I’m really sorry about the question.’

She seemed normal, like nothing had happened. How do girls do this? I mean, how can they just be so normal every time? How can someone have such perfect control over their nerves, it just felt like I was the one who was so nervous to talk to her & her reply made me more hesitant. Damn! How could she be so calm!?

‘W...would you like tea?’

‘Well, it’s raining, and I’m getting late for home, but it doesn’t seem it is going to stop anytime soon!’

She seemed in a hurry.

‘Till then we could just have a cup of tea, right?’

She nodded while I pulled out my wallet to pay. She forced to pay her share, but I denied right away. While we had tea, she just stared at the raindrops and didn’t say anything. When we were done, and it had nearly stopped raining, we started walking towards the campus entrance.

‘Can I ask you something?’

‘Yes, of course,’ I smiled.

‘While you were paying for the tea I saw a picture of a person in military uniform in your wallet, is it your dad’s?’