

ALL FOR YOU

SUDIPTO DAS

Just a few months back I heard the name Kayan after almost a decade. Kayan Dastur had been the most popular name in India for the past many months. No celebrity could occupy more space than him either in print or electronic media. Reality shows had to change their format all together to accommodate more of the realities from Kayan's life. Even the second cousin of the father-in-law of the neighbour of a woman, who claimed to have worked in Kayan's house when Kayan was just one year old, gave interviews to media. There's no special gift for guessing the most popular baby name at this moment in India. People lost track of the girls with whom Kayan was linked emotionally, sexually or politically. At twenty three Kayan was the youngest Prime Minister, beating the more-than-two-centuries old record of William Pitt. I thought that Kayan was India's latest obsession. But to my surprise I discovered that the international media was equally hysteric about Kayan.

I was waiting at the Frankfurt airport for the connecting flight to San Francisco. All the electronic displays were showing Kayan. Very liberally he was being given the credit for getting India's membership into the elite club of developed nations. Looked like, finally India could shed the diamond-jubilee-tag of a developing nation. I unfolded the screen of my new i-sab and placed it on the table in front of me in the Indian restaurant I chose to sit and kill time. I took exceptionally long time to set up the screen at a good distance from my eyes and then unfold the key board in front of it. By the time I went to the portal of Times of India Kayan had already started taking oath as the seventeenth Prime Minister of India. In spite of the 2 Gbps speed on my 6.5G powered i-sab, the video streaming was slow. I found people stopping by the displays in the airport to catch a glimpse of the historical moment. I still had to wait a full three more hours.

I folded the screen and the keyboard back and put them into my pocket. It was now really getting on to my nerves. It was too much of Kayan everywhere, in India and also outside India. I reclined on the chair and fixed my eyes on one of the distant displays. I never thought that I would ever hear the name Kayan again in my life. It was not a typical Rahul or Vikas or Anand type of name that every third person in India would have. It was also neither one of the thousand names of Vishnu or Shiva – that made its chance really bleak to be accepted in India as a preferred name. Many foreign nationals used to join our college and we got used to names like Avadun, Babak, Zarbanu, Gefen and Adel, which I heard never again not only in India but also elsewhere in the world. Most of these people used to come from Iran or Turkey. When we first heard the name Kayan Yazdani during the orientation program in the first year it did evoke a surprise among us because by that time we hadn't yet heard the names of all the other foreign students. Kayan was the only foreign student - an Iranian by birth but French by nationality. And he was the first guy who fell in love with Ira.

Ira – a small name that evoked so much of emotions, emotions which most of us couldn't ever explain, emotions that reminded all of us of so many relationships that were never named, emotions that never died even after ten years. Ira – too perfect a girl – so perfect that she never fitted into anything conventional. Ira still occupied a great part of our hearts - but ironically she was the one with whom we all had the least contact now-a-days. I never saw her in the past ten years. None of us had seen her either. Only a handful of us were in touch with her occasionally over the past many years. I always took some extra amount of pain to keep in touch with as much people as possible. Might be that's why I knew her whereabouts for most part of these ten years. Our work took us to different places and the initial excess of contacts gradually eroded away. The relationships gradually got restricted to the social networking sites. Very strangely Ira was not available in any of the networking sites – perhaps she didn't want any relationship to be restricted just to a screen. That's surely a reason why she gradually sunk into oblivion. She kept in touch only with people who managed to remember her phone numbers and call her occasionally. Since video streaming through phones became quite fast in India she had been streaming video clips on and off to some of us. Strangely none of the clips captured her – they were what she had captured through her eyes. I knew her so well that in most cases I could see her through her videos. Other people who failed to do so gradually lost interest in the

videos and subsequently in her. She very rarely featured in any discussion at the old friends' meets. Even the guys who fell madly in love with her – well, I don't remember anyone who didn't love her – didn't seem to remember her and all that she had done for all of us. There were those four years of our lives which bore so much marks of Ira. We never knew that those marks would eventually turn into lines casually drawn on sea shore – lines that would be erased so easily even by the smallest wave.

By the time we completed ten years of our graduation, Ira was so much a thing of remote past that she was totally missed out for the grand alumni party in Goa. Even Kayan, who had flown in from Paris especially for the party, Ken, Abhi, Ahan and Tanaz, all of whom had got new meanings in their lives only after knowing Ira, or Ruhu, Sanaz and Shima, Ira's closest friends in college for whom she had made the biggest sacrifices that anyone could ever make for friends, didn't notice that Ira was missing. The previous few months had been very hectic for me. Our startup was new and the four of us involved with it had become incommunicado to the external world. For at least six months I was not in touch with any of my friends. When I got the message from Ahan about the plan for celebrating a decade of our graduation I got back to society and started catching up with my friends. Apart from Kayan and a few others most of us were in India. Amidst my hectic work I just waited eagerly for the event so that I could get a much needed leisure. Even for once it didn't strike me that Ira was never in any of the networking communities through which we'd been in touch all these days. When I was checking into the Goa Marriott Resort and bumped on Ruhu I suddenly remembered if Ira had been informed. Very expectedly Ruhu hadn't changed a bit in all these years – she had just become much more gorgeous and voluptuous and flirty too. Even at thirty three she looked like the teen aged vamp that she was in college. I generally saw her almost once a month because our kids went to the same school. Still after seeing me in Goa she screamed, 'Oh, Aryan,' and gave me such a tight hug, as if she saw me at least after a few decades.

I asked Ruhu about Ira. 'If someone', she shrugged off and told, 'doesn't even have the decency to be in touch with her old friends why should we take the extra pain in finding out where the hell in the world she is getting herself screwed?' Her language was always like that. But still those words sounded really very gross, especially when the whole world knew that it was Ira, who, just to save Ruhu from the disciplinary action and the ignominy, went ahead and accepted in front of the management that it was she, Ira and not Ruhu, who was caught having sex with a guy by the security in the lab in the middle of the night.

Seeing my reaction and guessing what could be going on in my mind she justified, 'See Aryan, I never forgot whatever she did for me. In fact I was always with her whenever she needed. I even bunked by semester just to be with her when her parents died in the car accident. I was one of the few people who stood by her even when she got pregnant with Arhan and was expelled for a semester. But she just vanished. Just because she did a big sacrifice for me I can't keep on looking for her throughout the life.' Then in her typical obnoxious style she came close to me and hissed into my ears, 'By the way, I never knew that after so many years you still miss her.' and pushed off, but not before hurling on me a peck. I just kept on wondering how pretentious and filthy a person could be. We all knew that she had freaked out the entire fifth semester with that rich Palestinian and wanted an excuse to bunk the exams. Ira's parents died just before the exams and she found the excuse. She convinced the dean of academics that she had to be with Ira during such a time and hence be allowed to take the exams later. In reality Ruhu spent that entire period with the Palestinian in a hotel. Just before the final semester when Ira was ostracized for being pregnant most of her friends tried to keep a distance from her. But for her sexcapades Ruhu needed Ira's house outside the campus - she couldn't afford to keep away from Ira. In a flash of a moment all those incidents just scrolled across my mind like a splash of rain on a windscreen. I tried hard to wipe the splash by putting the wiper to the maximum speed, but still the splashes kept on pouring on the windscreen. I really felt bad for Ira.

After going to the hotel room I tried to call Ira up at the number she'd called me from a few months back. As usual the number was not functional. I sent her a mail and asked her to call me back immediately. I knew she wouldn't call back soon. I could have written that I needed some help and I knew she would call me back at the earliest. But then I didn't want to lie.

Very surprisingly I got a call from a UK number within a few minutes. Ira spoke, 'So, you all perverts, are sexed up to suck the old wines from the old bottles? Even the fat-ass elder daughter of Professor Asrani was much better than the lousy women of your class. Still you all can't miss the

chance of rubbing against their sagging boobs!’ That’s Ira, in her characteristic lingo – something that she didn’t change even an iota.

‘Ira, what a surprise! What the hell are you doing in UK and how come you know about the alumni meet?’

‘What do you think of me? I know everything – each and every bit of nasty things that you all do even now – even after you all are dads and moms!’

‘Why didn’t you come here?’

‘Because you never asked me!’

‘C’mon, you know how tough it’s to contact you.’

‘Did you try?’

‘Sorry sweetheart, this time I was just too busy. But let me tell you this. I’m really missing you. All of us never met after our convocation in 2009. It’s just so exciting to see some of our batch-mates in person after so long. Believe me, it’s only you – the sexiest babe of our batch - who is missing.’

‘Aryan, you are just a terrible flirt! Can’t you say better things?’ Ira started laughing.

‘Don’t change the topic,’ I told, ‘why didn’t you come? Don’t you want to see your friends after ten years?’

‘Friends?’ she suddenly turned serious.

‘Yes?’

‘You call these maniacs friends?’

‘C’mon Ira, once upon a time you did everything for these very jerks, do you remember?’

‘Ya, ya, I’m always fond of jerks! That’s why I kept in touch only with the biggest jerk – that’s you! Have fun. And let me know later whose boobs you liked the most. It has to be either Shima or Sanaz.’

‘Oh Ira, you just don’t change!’

‘You too!! Anyway, I’ve to push off. Will talk to you later. Have fun. And, Okay, see you, bye.’

That’s how most of her call ended.

Ira was nowhere in the party. No one seemed to even make a note of the only absentee. I came home with a heavy heart. I was never very close to Ira. But very strangely we both were beside each other at the best and worst moments of our lives. I accompanied her for the abortion to Calcutta. I didn’t bunk my semester, but commuted daily to Calcutta after the exams and stayed at their house when her parents died. Ira’s brother, my namesake, was just fifteen years old. I stayed with him for as long as I could. The bubbly and loving guy suddenly turned into a stone. After the religious functions were over I brought Aryan to my hostel and kept him for almost a month. Till date Aryan never failed to call me at least once a week from where ever he was.

I couldn’t have become the president of the students’ body had Ira not strategized the campaigning. She discovered that more than fifty percent of the students are very low profile and didn’t come out to vote. Painstakingly she went from hostel to hostel and motivated all these people – mainly the married doctorate students, the masters students not from big cities and the students from financially weaker sections – to come forward and vote for me and in turn I’d bring them out of their ghettos and put them in the main stream. My opponent Aftab was the most handsome guy in our batch and also a champion in sports and cultural activities. Almost everyone had vouched for him. But still I won with a huge margin just because of Ira’s strategy.

When I was hospitalized for over a month with a broken leg Ira used to regularly visit me and entertain for as long as she could. We’re not very much in touch after leaving college. But still, when I broke up with Saba – I was at Stanford pursuing my masters and she doing her MBA in India – she called me regularly for almost a month. I couldn’t remember any occasion when I was sad and she was not beside me. I didn’t know why, but after that function I felt an urge to see Ira. I called her up again from the hotel in the night after the party was over.

‘Ira, I want to see you.’

‘What?’

‘Yes, I want to see you. You’re the only one from my batch whom I haven’t seen you for more than a decade. I keep seeing that vamp Ruhu every now and then. Ishika is one of my clients.

Riya is our vendor and Eni is one of our most prospective customers. You know how much I hated all these females. They are all a lot of selfish and sadistic nuts. But still I've to smile and even flirt with them'

'Oh, so you want to flirt with me now?'

'Oof, why can't you be serious?'

'Yes, I'm serious Aryan. Looks like after all these years finally you want to sleep with me!

Does your wife know about this intention?'

'Ira, just shut up.'

'OK, I shut up.... so what's the deal?'

'Deal?'

'Yes, about you seeing me?'

'You tell me when we can meet. I'd be visiting Bay Area in a few months? Why don't you come there? Or I can hop over in UK for sometime on my way to US.'

'I'm leaving London. I'd be staying in San Francisco for the next few months. Let me know when you reach there. You stay with me for some time.'

'Wow, so it's actually you who wants to sleep with me?'

'Okay. Don't stay with me. I know what's in your mind. Ishika has recently got divorced and she's staying in Redwood City all alone. So it's nothing like sleeping with her and cracking some big deals, right?'

'That's how you do business?'

'I don't mind! By the way, does Ishika know that you used to shag with her photo?'

'How the hell on earth do you remember such things?'

'Men are always men, do you still look at her in that way?'

'C'mon Ira. You always embarrass me.'

'Why do you do things like that?'

'Forget that, now tell me when are you moving to San Francisco?'

'Next week.'

'Okay, I'll let you know before I go there next.'

'So should I tell Ishika to get a whole body treatment so that you would have real fun jumping on her?'

'She is horrible now. She has lost all those she had ten years back. By the way, how do you look like now? Are you still that hot chick who had bowled half the class?'

'I think I'm better now. I've to do business, you know,' she started giggling over the phone.

'What?' I exclaimed. She kept on laughing and then before hanging up just said, 'Let me know a few days in advance.'

I just heard the announcement for my flight. Before I picked up my stuff and proceeded towards boarding, I glanced once more on the displays and they were still showing something about Kayan Dastur.

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I heard someone calling my name loudly. I was looking for Ira in the crowd after getting out of the San Francisco International airport. I searched for the source of the voice. Before I could really find it out something crashed against me. My luggage skidded away from my hand and before I could understand anything further I found myself embraced and face to face to someone. I raised my hands and put them on the face I was facing so closely. I extolled, 'Ira.' I never saw her from such a close distance. I never knew that she had such ocean deep piercing moist eyes and a sharp nose. Her lips were shivering with million unspoken words. Her eyes were fixed on mine. After an elongated wordful of silence she spoke first, 'How are you?'

'I'm fine. Ira, you look so beautiful! You look gorgeous. What have you been doing all these years?'

'Just waiting for your compliments.' she giggled and continued in her characteristic lingo, 'When we're in college that under age bitch never gave any of us a chance to get your compliments.'

That's Ira back to her normal form. She used to always refer to Saba as 'under age bitch' because she was five years younger than us. Ira always told that Saba would ditch me someday and I never believed it at all till she actually did.

'Had you been like this ten years back I won't have run after Saba.'

'Balls,' she said, 'I was much better then. I always had the perfect body and even that zero size guy, who used to work in the students' canteen, had bigger breasts than your bitch. I still wonder what exactly you saw in her – neither boobs nor butt – she had nothing!' Ira started pulling my cart. I kept on staring at her. When she found out that she just smiled. I was expecting something nasty from her, but, very unusual of her, she didn't say anything. And for the first time I saw her blushing. After some time she said quietly, 'Aryan, why are you staring at me like this?'

'Just seeing you after so long. Just can't take my eyes from you. How are you Ira?'

'Let's go home. You're tired', she told. I put my hand around her neck and moved slowly beside her to the parking lot. Ira might be correct – she might have been more beautiful ten years back - she was the most sought after girl in college. Her eyes were things of obsession for most boys. People died to be with her, to get close to her – not so much because she was one of the most attractive girls, but more because she had something in her that made everyone around her feel wonderful. When there were thousands of raunchy morphed pictures of Ruhu, Sanaz and Ishika in everyone's laptops there was not a single one of Ira's in spite of her being no less beautiful. I couldn't make out exactly what changes she had undergone in all these years. Perhaps she had changed very little while most other girls of our batch had changed drastically both in their physique and attitudes. Perhaps that's what made Ira seem different to me. No, there had to be something else also that I couldn't explain to myself. While walking side by side with her I was realizing more and more that this Ira was not the same Ira of the past. She almost spoke the same language even after so many years, looked more or less exactly same as before, still she was a totally different person – and surprisingly somehow I felt the present Ira more endearing to me. For the entire stretch of ten fifteen minutes to the parking lot we didn't talk to each other. But we did exchange millions of unspoken words. From time to time I turned sideways and glanced at her, just to find that she was also glancing at me with her piercing eyes the depth of which drowned me deep into them. Ira's eyes were always famous, but were they always so piercing and deep? I couldn't say. I never got a chance to look into her eyes in the past and this was the first time I did so. Perhaps Kayan, Ayan and Tanaz had seen her eyes the very first day they saw her. Just before getting into her Audi Q5 convertible car I pulled her hand. She asked, 'What?' I said slowly, 'Have you been happy all these years without us?'

'I was never without you.'

'You're not with me either. Just a few phone calls once in a while.'

'You never saw my birthday in facebook. But still you never forgot to wish me on the right day. I never wanted to be laid in the corner of a screen of your laptop. I wanted to be free. I'm free. I'm happy this way.'

'Ira, you never sounded so melancholic. Are you hiding anything from me? We've always helped each other in all possible ways. Can I help you now in any way?'

Her face changed suddenly. For a while I felt she was indeed the same Ira – I saw her characteristic naughty and mischievous smile back on her face. 'I just need', she said, 'some good sex. Tell me sweetheart, can you help me?'

The whole mood changed. I couldn't stop laughing. Those were the first words she'd spoken to me on the very first day in college. I was shocked beyond anything. I was returning from the institute. When I was passing by the canteen a girl came up to me and told, 'Excuse me.'

'Yes, how can I help you?' I responded. That's when she spoke those words, loudly enough for everyone else in the canteen to turn their heads towards us. There was suddenly a pin drop of silence and everyone was waiting eagerly for my response. I lost all words and couldn't figure out what to do or say. Another girl stood up from her seat, came towards me and asked me directly, 'Are you fucking impotent?'

Very spontaneously it came out of me, 'No, no I'm not.'

'Oh, is it that? Then why are you keeping quiet? Just go ahead and help her out.' Then she turned towards the girl who had just asked me for sex, 'Ira, take her to your room. He seems to be helpful guy!' And very obediently the girl, named Ira, asked me to come with her. The entire canteen broke in laughter seeing my condition. Ira had proceeded a bit, when she turned back and asked me

again to come with her. I followed her silently like a robot and as soon as we came out of the canteen Ira told, 'I'm really sorry. My seniors asked me to say those words to a fresher and you're the first one to enter the canteen after that. I'm Ira. Please don't mind. What's your name?'

'I'm Aryan. How did you know that I'm a fresher?'

'Oh, you look like one!'

That was how I met Ira. We're both laughing even after she had started the ignition of her car. I was settling down in her luxurious car when I got a call in my phone. I pulled out my i-sab from my pocket and attended to it. When I was putting the phone back into my pocket Ira said, 'So you're also one of those stupids who have bought the famous i-sab?'

'C'mon, i-sab is quite handy and really good.'

'Do you like the name? It's the dumbest thing that came out of Nari's head.'

'Who Nari? The present CEO of Apple?'

'Ya, I believe you know that for Apple's latest all-in-one phone-cum-laptop-cum-multimedia product he wanted to have a *desi*, Indian, name which would mean *everything* and he came up with this silly name *sab*!'

'Is this story true? I also read it somewhere.'

'Yes, it's true. I asked Nari himself and he was so proud of the name.'

'It's silly, but then your favourite i-pod also sounded silly when I heard about it for the first time. By the way, how do you know Nari?'

'No I don't know him. I was compering a show where he was one of the guests.'

'You compere shows? That's what Reliance-Stanley does now-a-days?'

'Yes,' Ira said smiling, 'they do. Actually it was an award function hosted by Reliance-Stanley and Nari got the Man of the Year award.' Ira had already got into Highway 101N. She was proceeding towards San Francisco city. I asked, 'You're freelancing for quite some time, right? When did you get into Reliance-Stanley?'

'Since a year. I did a market study for Reliance-Stanley and Isha liked it very much. She offered me to head their strategic planning in North America.'

'You mean Isha Ambani?'

'Yes, she was the one instrumental in the acquisition and she heads Reliance-Stanley.'

'Wow, you seem to be doing very well in job! It's good that you haven't done anything crazy in your profession. Had you not slept with Arhan in the final semester you'd have been the topper of our batch. I sometimes wonder why the hell you did that. We all were shocked. That was something that we could never relate to you. You're never like Ruhu who slept with almost half the class. We somehow couldn't believe it at all. I won't have believed had I myself not taken you for the abortion.'

'What's wrong in getting pregnant? And why did you always hate Ruhu so much? Because she never slept with you?'

'Me sleeping with Ruhu – that irritating selfish whore? I never saw anyone more mean than her. Anyway, can I ask you something?'

'What?'

'Did Arhan really make you pregnant?'

'Why?'

'Just a few years back I heard that his wife had divorced him because he seems to be impotent.'

'Oh, I didn't know that.'

'Yes, that's true.'

'Well, I can't say if he is impotent. But I can surely say that he didn't make me pregnant.'

'What?'

'Yes, it's a long story. I'll tell you when we reach home.'

'No way, you're going to tell me now.'

'I just wanted to settle a score with Arhan and I found that the best way to do.'

'But then how did you get pregnant?'

'It was Neel.'

'Neel, out of all? Are you just fooling me? Neel and you? I just can't believe.'

‘Sometime in final year he sent me a long mail saying that he loved me like a mad but couldn’t tell me ever. He just wanted to do something for me that I would remember forever. I remembered that and when I wanted to settle the score with Arhan I asked Neel to cooperate.’

‘And you never told me all these till now? And Neel agreed?’

‘Yes. He did. I asked him to come to my house. My brother used to come and stay there sometimes. But most of the times it used to be empty. I told him why I wanted his help. He did everything so obediently. I still remember the first time we’d sex. It was like I was raping him.’

‘Fuck! How could you do that Ira? I knew always that you can do anything! But this is just crazy. Didn’t you have any inhibition at all to undress in front of someone whom you always treated as a stranger?’

‘Yes, I did, considering the fact that it was my first time. And I hated it so much. I used to take bath for almost hours after that. Do you remember that I used to catch cold so often in the final semester?’

‘Yes, I do. Ira, you have always amazed me. But this is just so gross? How could you be so mean? And what score did you have to settle with Arhan that you almost screwed up his entire career? And along with Arhan you yourself were also impacted. Both of you were expelled in the final semester. Arhan could’ve got into Stanford so easily. Only because he was out of the race it made my entry into Stanford a cakewalk. I still say that to him whenever we meet. Later he never got a good recommendation from any of the professors. And that idiot still now feels guilty for something that he never did. How did you manipulate all these?’

‘You shouldn’t feel bad for that. You always wished to get into Stanford but you’re not ready to even apply to the same school because Arhan had better chance than you. Just think that providence had interfered and made your wish come true.’

‘Ira, you know me. I’m not that selfish. Not that I had high regards for that pervert who could never talk anything other than sex and took pride in screwing one of his minor distant relatives, but still, Ira, had you not told me this I won’t have ever imagined that you can do harm to anyone. It just doesn’t go with your image. You’d helped so many people in so many ways that it’s just impossible to believe that you can be so vindictive. May I know what exactly you wanted to settle with him?’

‘No, that will die with me. And if ever I say that to anyone, that would surely be you.’

I was so shocked that I fell silent for quite some time. Ira kept on driving on 101 which was getting crowded more and more as we’re approaching San Francisco. She took an exit for Market Street. She also didn’t speak for some time. I was trying to add up certain pieces. Neel was one of the most decent guys in our batch. He came from a relatively modest background. His dad used to work as a draftsman in my dad’s company and I knew how much he earned. Though Neel was on scholarship, still he had to struggle a lot for his finances. We always pulled in money for him for all our trips and entertainment. He is now doing exceptionally well in his career. But still he remains the most modest of us. Apart from Arhan and Ira, there was also another person who couldn’t appear for the final semester exams on time - and that was Neel. He suddenly vanished from the hostel a few days before the exams. When he didn’t appear before the exams I called him up at his home. His father told that he had suddenly fallen sick and won’t be able to appear for the exams. I met the dean and convinced him to allow him to appear for the exams a few weeks later so that he could graduate with us - I knew how much he needed a job. The same day Ira called me in the middle of night and asked me if I knew everything about Neel. I was a bit surprised because in the previous four years Ira had never given even a wink to Neel. Apart from me, Neel was almost a nonentity to most others - including Ira - at least that’s what I thought. I felt so good that Ira was there for anyone when needed. I took her to Neel’s place the immediate weekend. Neel seemed to be struck with a million volts when he saw Ira. I was even more surprised when Ira sat silently beside him for quite long and rubbed her hands gently on his forehead. I went out of the room on and off to meet his parents and other family members. But Ira never moved out, nor did she take her hands off his forehead. When it was time to leave I could see her struggling to hide tears. On the way back she sat silently beside me in the car. After sometime she leaned her head on my shoulders, held my hands tight and started weeping inconsolably. I asked our driver to stop the car. Patiram, our driver, had been always very understanding and sensitive. He always left me and Saba alone whenever needed. I never had to say anything to him. He considered Ira almost as a member of our family. After Patiram left the car I allowed Ira to cry for some time. Only a few weeks back I’d brought her to Calcutta for her abortion.

Patiram knew it all and took extra care to keep it as confidential as possible. The verdict of the disciplinary council had also come out just a few days back. Ira and Arhan both were expelled for one semester. I thought all these made her cry so much. Only one thing she kept on repeating, ‘Aryan, promise me you won’t ever misunderstand me, you will never look down upon me, you will never go away from me. I didn’t do anything for myself’. Her words were incoherent. I took all those as the trauma of the past few weeks. I embraced her and she drowned her face into my chest. I don’t remember how long she stayed like that. Patiram returned before it was getting dark. Ira didn’t move till we reached our college well past midnight. Seated in Ira’s car, I could now make some sense of her weeping. I also remembered one more incident which made perfect sense now. Ira used to be absent from all the gatherings. Very few people would even remember her in all those gatherings. Few of her close friends like Ruhu and Shima used to speak quite badly of her. Ruhu used to always bring the topic of Ira getting pregnant and blame her for ruining the career of Arhan. I now recalled that Neel used to always move away from such discussions while most people used to take some voyeuristic pleasure. I also recalled Neel was the only person who used to ask me occasionally about Ira. Things we’re falling in place now.

We entered the Oakwood serviced apartments on Market Street. I gradually recovered from the shock. I was wondering what Arhan could have done which could piss off someone like Ira so much. Ira parked her car, took out my luggage and pulled me by my hand. I followed her to her apartment. She had checked into the apartment just a few weeks back and it still didn’t have much furniture. It had books lying everywhere – not much different from her room in hostel. She closed the door, threw her stilettos, kept my luggage in the middle of the huge living room and threw herself on one of the many scattered bean bags. She reclined on the bean bag while I opened my shoes. When I was done I took another look round the room. It was so bare everywhere. I pulled another bean bag and sat in front of her. She pulled herself up, sat straight and looked directly into eyes. She took my hand and said in a hushed and melodramatic way, ‘It’s my pleasure to have you as my guest. Please feel at home and allow me to be the best host,’ and we laughed for some time. That was what she used to tell us every time she invited us to her house just outside the campus. Her parents had bought that so that they could come and stay from time to time. But the house finally became our den for all parties, taking drugs and hatching plans. People like Ruhu used her house to sleep with her boyfriends without being caught. Only for once Ira’s house was not available because her brother was staying there at that time and that’s when Ruhu was caught by the security in the lab. She was such a nymphomaniac that she couldn’t even wait for a day. Ira took the blame because she felt guilty that because of the unavailability of her house Ruhu was caught. That’s Ira who took such big blame on her to save someone. After we stopped laughing she held my hand for some more time and told, ‘Thanks Aryan.’

‘Thanks, for what?’ I asked.

‘For taking the pain to come and meet me after so long. I knew even if anyone from our batch remembers me it would be you and not, for sure, any of those who pretended to love me so much. They never loved me. They just wanted to fling a smart girl around them. I never played with their emotions. I did whatever I could do for all of them. Being their girlfriend was just not my cup of tea. Kayan might have loved me really, but then he was the first to forget. I bumped on him once in the Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris few years after graduation. He didn’t even stop by me. I ran after him, pulled him by his shirt and asked, Hey Kayan, it’s just two years and you decline to even recognize me? Kayan apologized to me for not recognizing me, but I knew he was lying. I didn’t stretch the conversation. You paid the least attention to me. I don’t even remember if you’d ever stared at my boobs.’

‘Ira’, I told, ‘why are you embarrassing me?’ I pulled her closer to me. I wrapped my hands around her neck. She was staring at the carpet. I asked her to raise her eyes and look at me. She kept on staring at the carpet. I kissed her on her face and told, ‘Ira, not everything needs to be told so blatantly. Some things are better understood untold. A relation that exists even without a word is something that persists forever and anything that needs to be remembered is better forgotten, isn’t it?’

Hearing that Ira raised her eyes, started smiling and said, ‘Aryan, you’re so bad at saying emotional things. Don’t try that.’ She took my hands into her and kissed my palms – something that she used to always do whenever she felt nervous or emotional. Then she tried to get up, but she couldn’t. She asked me to pull her up. I stood up first and then pulled her up. She took me to her

bedroom and said, 'That's the only bed I've. I don't get guys home to sleep with me so I manage with one bed. You're the first guy to come to my house in ten years. So you have no option than to really sleep with me!'

'Wow, that would be really great,' I said with a smile, 'you can trust me - I won't jump on you. By the way, you seem to be making hell lot of money. You drive one of the costliest cars, stay in a posh place but why don't you have someone make your interiors? What will you do with so much money? Your parents have also left bags of wealth for you. Had I been as lucky as you I'd have retired by now and spent time with the girls in Amsterdam or Pattaya.'

'Don't fake. You don't have the balls to do those! Relax baby, take some rest. Let me have a shower. You can go later. I don't know much about this city. You know it more. You're going to take me out tonight and show the city. I've been just slogging the past few weeks ever since I've come here and I need some break now.'

She brought me some magazines and books to read and went inside the bathroom. I came out in the living room and sat on the only sofa - surely the costliest one I'd ever seen. I was surprised to see all my favourite books - Erich Segal, Amitav Ghose, Tagore, Sunil Ganguly and many more. I opened the 'Sea of Poppies'. On the first page it had written by me 'On your 21st birthday - with best wishes and lots of love from Aryan'. I remembered that I'd gifted her sometime in 2008 or 2009 immediately after the release of the book. All other books were gifted by me at different times, Tagore's *Shesher Kobita*, Erich Segal's *Love Story*, *Doctors and Man*, *Woman and Child*, Sunil Ganguly's *Sei Samay* and many more. I flipped through the pages of the books. Though very strange, but still I could feel Ira's touch on each page. I kept the books down and went ahead to her working desk. It had piles of books and magazines on finance. The laptop was buried under some papers. On a shelf were lying a few old photos - each one a group photo taken at various times during those four years. Ira was there in a few ones, but I could see myself in all the snaps. I took all the photos on my hand and each of them was bringing back forgotten memories. I couldn't even remember when exactly some of those photos were taken.

'Trespassing on others' properties?'

I was lost in past. Ira's words brought me back to present. I turned back. Ira was standing in front of me. She was still rubbing her long hair with a towel, her body was still wet and drops of water were falling on the carpet around where she stood. She was wearing a pair of really short denim shorts and a small and tight vest above. I never saw her in such minimal attire. I just couldn't keep off my eyes from her toned body. She looked like a totally unknown curvaceous and gorgeous woman trapped in Ira's body. With a blush on her face she looked down, saw her own body, then looked into my eyes and in a mock anger told, 'Aryan, remove your x-ray eyes from my body. Your eyes seem to rip everything off my body. Are you seeing me like this for the first time?'

'I don't think I saw you so beautiful ever in the past. And also your dresses in the past used to be much bigger than this. I don't have bad memories. Do you think I'd have let you go alone had you been so beautiful back then? Have you started going to parlours now-a-days? Come closer.'

'What do you want to do?'

I pulled her close to me, took the black pen from the table and put a mark on her forehead, something that the mothers do to keep evil eyes off their beautiful kids. She didn't say anything. She asked me to go for the shower.

3

San Francisco was one of my favourite cities. I knew every nook and corner of this city. I could have taken her to the many grand places like Fisherman's Wharf, China Town, Alcatraz, The Cliff House, Mission Dolores, Ghirardelli Square, The Crookedest Street, Twin Peaks or even the Muir Woods. But I chose the one that's rather very unconventional. We crossed the Golden Gate, took the immediate exit after the recreational area, went under the bridge to the left and climbed the small hillock towards an abandoned fort. It was already getting dark and the air was quite chill. We sat on a broken wall at a precarious edge of the fort overlooking a deep cliff hanging over the San Francisco Bay. That spot gave the best view of the Golden Gate. Mist had covered the upper portions of the tall towers of Golden Gate. The lower parts were engulfed in darkness. The bridge seemed to be floating

in the air. Ira wore a beautiful and well chosen blue embroidered dress. I could already see that the biggest change in her was her attention to herself and her dresses. I couldn't remember any time when she'd gone for shopping for dresses. For the first time I saw the woman in her. I chose a place where I could lean against something. Reclining against the support, I hung my two legs on the two sides of the broken wall – one leg hanging into the cliff and the other one inside. Ira stretched her legs along the wall and reclined against me facing backwards. Every time I came to this spot I got mesmerized. We didn't talk for quite some time. Then I started, 'Why are you still alone? Don't you want to settle in life?'

'You didn't marry me. That's why I'm still unmarried.'

'I'm serious Ira. I can't see you like this.'

'Don't see. Anyway, you see me once in ten years – at that rate you would see me only three or four times more, provided I survive for another thirty forty years. You tell me something. What's your latest wish?'

That's again something which she used to always jokingly ask whenever something really bad happened to me. During our final semester I was wrongly convicted of indulging in ragging by Professor Sharma - she was one of the most hated professors. Luckily I was saved from a semester expulsion by our dean, but Professor Sharma tried all her means to make my life miserable. At that time I'd wished that I'd like to see her suspended from the college for ever. Ira told me, 'Your wish will be granted by son,' and put her hand on my forehead in the way the elder people showered their blessings. Then again when Saba broke off with me I was totally shattered and told Ira that I'd wish to see Saba in some trouble because of the horrible company she had been with lately - I believed that it was her new company that had distanced her from me. Ira again told me the same thing, 'Your wishes would be granted my son.' Last time she told the same thing when, a few years back, I became the victim of office politics and wanted to see the careers of three of my ex-colleagues get ruined.

Very interestingly my wishes used to materialize in some way or other by some mere coincidences. Professor Sharma was caught red handed siphoning government aid for her projects to her personal account. She was expelled from the college. It happened after we'd graduated and Ira was completing the final semester after her expulsion for one semester. We all were very much surprised when we heard the news. Though we hated her, but we never had any suspicion about her integrity. We couldn't ever understand how she could do such a stupid thing which any ass would think twice before doing because the chance of getting caught was anyway very high.

Few months after Saba had broken up with me Ira called me from Calcutta and said, 'Hey, I just saw your underage bitch at a pub getting her ass massaged by an asshole.'

'What the hell are you doing in Calcutta now?'

'I'd come to meet some of my relatives. Anyway, just wanted to tell you that you should really forget that bitch.'

The very next day it was flashed in all news channels that a girl from Calcutta and a few Nigerians were caught red handed taking drugs in a rave party at a place called Bhasha Choddo near Calcutta. Though the faces were covered up in all the clips, still the girl looked very familiar to me. I got a call from Ira in the afternoon saying that the girl being shown in all channels was indeed Saba. I somehow couldn't believe that Saba could go to rave parties. Ira rebuked me for not accepting that she was indeed a bitch. I felt so bad for Saba and also for her parents. I tried calling her parents, but somehow couldn't reach them and gradually I got engrossed in my studies in Stanford. Within a year I met Pritha at the Ali Akbar College of Music in San Rafael, little north of San Francisco, during a concert in memory of its founder Ali Akbar Khan. I gradually recovered from my breakup with Saba. Pritha and Ira became friends over phones and e-mails and chats, though they never met each other in person. The next year I got married to Pritha, soon after the completion of my MS. The entire episode of Saba became a matter of oblivious past.

Few years back, after I'd to leave my previous company due to some nasty politics, there was a big news in our industry - Piya, Abhi and Arad, my colleagues at Magnum Power Products, were accused of selling confidential information about Magnum to their competitor Syndicate Energy Incorporates. Incidentally these very three people were involved in a nasty politics against me in Magnum.

Somehow Ira remembered their names and she was the first one to call me up in the middle of night to inform about the news that had rocked heavily the energy products industry in Europe. Apparently they had approached a common supplier of Magnum and Syndicate for passing on some crucial information about Magnum's future products and strategies to Syndicate in exchange of some huge cash, a part of which would have gone to the vendor himself. But the vendor earned much more than that share by leaking the information back to Magnum and the career of each of those three people was ruined forever. I was happy no doubt, but was wondering how they could do such a stupid thing.

Ira used to always take pride in her blessings. She used to claim that it was only for her blessings that God used to intervene in my life and punish the people who took pangs with me. When Ira asked me about my latest wish I told her casually that I'd like to see our startup, Veda Controls, taken over by the Munich based company Wissen Energie – the biggest name in the field of Controlled Energy Systems. She again put her hand on my head and told, 'My dear mortal human, your wish will be granted.' and we again broke into laughter.

The next two days passed on just like a wink. We returned home the next day, only after seeing the sun rise across the San Francisco Bay. The night became very chill and we spent some time inside Ira's car. We lived the past ten years in just a few hours of that night. We talked million words. We also spoke zillion more wordful of silences. We created our own moments and allowed each moment to condense into a permanent pearl in our memories. We didn't sleep for more than fifty hours. When it was time for me to leave she told, 'Aryan, you're so much frightened with the prospect of sleeping with me that you didn't sleep at all for two days.'

At the airport she suddenly broke down and wept inconsolably. It reminded me of the trip back from Calcutta after meeting Neel. At that time I mistook it as an outburst of her depression due to her recent abortion and expulsion. Only two days back I knew why she was weeping so much. And she was weeping almost like that again. Finally she controlled herself and left the airport suddenly. I stood perplexed seeing her getting dissolved into the crowd.

That was the last time I saw her.

4

After returning from San Francisco I got busy with my work. I used to talk to Ira occasionally and she sounded absolutely normal. She used her characteristic lingo and enquired about Ruhu's growing ass. She informed me that Ishika had turned lesbian and started living together with a blonde girl – a 'golden haired bitch' in Ira's word. We made fun that now my chances of sleeping with Ishika were really bleak. Very surprisingly my latest wish was also getting materialized. Wissen Energie was looking for expansion in India and we're the front runner among their shortlisted companies to be acquired from India. One day Ira's brother Aryan called me up and asked if I knew anything about the new venture, that Ira was going to start, for which she had sold all her inherited properties in India. I really didn't know of it. I called Ira immediately and she told that she had decided to start her own consultancy firm. I asked her if she was well aware of all the risks. She sounded very confident. In the next few months I got too busy with the acquisition. Yes, finally we're acquired by Wissen in an unbelievable deal in which I made hell lot of money. Ira was always enquiring about the status and when everything happened she sounded very relieved.

Then one morning, in December, Ira called me from a German number.

'Can you talk to me for some time?'

'Yes, I'm free. After the acquisition anyway the work load has reduced a lot. By the way when did you go to Germany?'

'I came yesterday for a meeting in Munich. Aryan, I don't have much time. I've to rush off. Just wanted to hear your voice before I go.'

'Where are you going?'

'Very far. But don't worry - I'm sure you'll see me very soon.'

'Stop this nonsense. Tell me where you're going.'

‘I’ll see you at Munich in a few hours. Be calm. I’ll be there. I’ll be there. I’ll take care of everything.’

5

While on the way to Munich I got a call from Wissen Energie. I was told that one of their investors, who had invested close to ten million Euros recently and who had influenced the acquisition of our company had expired the previous day. She had come to Munich for a meeting. Ten million Euros – that would have been the total worth of everything that Ira would have inherited and acquired in the past ten years – everything spent till the last pie just for me.

After returning from Munich I, Aryan and Niti first tracked down Professor Sharma. She and her family had to leave the college for ever after the incident. She took really long to recover from the trauma. We assured her that we also believed that she was innocent and that we wanted to find out what exactly had happened. She suspected a clerk, whom she used to rebuke a lot, but then she was very sure that he couldn’t have known her bank account number where the amount was transferred. In fact she very rarely used that particular account. We went to the clerk and he broke down in front of us. Professor Sharma used to generally go to that particular bank once in a while to deposit some meagre amount just to keep the account active. On one such day Ira bumped on her. She was in a hurry. Ira told Professor Sharma that she would collect the deposit-receipt from the bank and hand it over to her later. That’s how she got the account number. Then she tracked that clerk who was very pissed off with Professor Sharma. She offered to pay him one hundred thousand rupees for his mother’s treatment. I remembered that’s when she sold her Reva car. When I asked her she told me that she wanted to help her maid at home. The clerk further told that us that during that time Ira had become quite close to him and from what he hinted we could make out that that was the second time she slept with someone – again for me!

As both of Ira’s parents had been senior officers in Indian Administrative Services, it was not hard to use some older contacts and track down the file for the case against Saba. Apparently the police got a lead from an anonymous female caller about a rave party. We tracked down one of the Nigerians who was also caught by the police. We went to go to Nigeria to meet him. He told that a girl offered to sleep with each of them and also a total of one million rupees if they got themselves arrested along with Saba. They were assured that the girl would get them released with her contacts. One of the Nigerians befriended Saba at a pub and invited her to a party at his place. When she reached the party she was offered coke which contained some banned drug. Another Nigerian took a photo of her in the party and sent it to police the next day. After getting the call from Ira when the police reached the place Saba had already taken the coke and tested positive for the banned drug.

We didn’t go further to find out how my ex-colleagues were framed. I didn’t want to find out how many more number of times she had to sell herself for me.

As long as Ira lived, she lived only for me. Her whole life was all for me. Why did she die? I never got an answer to it.

As long as she lived she loved me. Now I’ll live to love her, posthumously.