

ONE



"It is seldom indeed that one parts on good terms, because if one were on good terms, one would not part."

Marcel Proust

Only two days ago, my wife, Shiraz has left for the university. It's almost about midnight and my friends filed out some half an hour ago. Bleary-eyed and jaded, I lie motionless on the floor of my room under the mercy of a stubbornly ineffective ceiling fan. I am shorn of clothing except my Jockey boxer shorts. My naked body is swathed in sweat. Sleep is dragging my consciousness into a whirlpool of suspended awakening, the mess of my senses compounded by the liberal dosages of bittersweet vodka.

I, Akbar Jawaid Aziz (Aks to my friends), am dead drunk after an interval of five months.

The long promised party is over. It was a house warming party that some of my friends had been pressing me for since I had shifted my residence from Patparganj to Andrewsganj. I had acquiesced but with a pre-condition: the party would take place only after Shiraz had left home. They know the reason pretty well—she does not like my consuming alcohol. Basically she does not like alcohol per se. Being a believer, she respects the taboos imposed by religion. Obviously, we could not hold a booze party while she was present. As of myself, I never drink in front of Shiraz as I am under a teetotelling oath. Love has its own sweet set of commandments. No lover minds making sacrifices for the sake of true love.

The August heat of Delhi is ever so oppressive with its nonchalantly spiraling levels of humidity. With an effort, I drag my hand towards the packet of *Gold Flake*. I light one stick and begin to suck at it. The smoke spirals into waves in the hot air under the fan and dances mindlessly. And its tinginess melts into me, pushing my mind further into the realms of hallucinations. I close my eyes and see red, green and yellow coloured patches in a pitch-dark vacuum. Bright and round patches. Appearing and disappearing without any order. My olfactory senses still feast on the aromas of the leftovers—bits of mutton kebabs, the chewed bony pieces of tandoori chicken scattered with dahi-dhaniya chutney, pea-nuts and over-fried paneer pakoras.

The room is imbued with the cocktail smell of variegated drinks—rum, whisky, beer and vodka. My guests (who are my colleagues-cum-friends at Passion Advertising—my current workplace) have different preferences. Rajiv (a copywriter like yours truly) drinks rum. Ramesh, who is into client servicing, drinks whisky. Jain, who looks after the accounts, takes beer. I relish vodka. Their laughter still reverberates in the room. Ha, ha, ha. Hoo, hoo, hoo. Hi, hi, hi I wonder how rarely two men laugh the same way. Or even women for that matter. But they all giggle, don't they?

I am afraid if the smell of alcohol reaches the doggy nostrils of my Muslim landlady, I will be immediately whisked out of my room. *Boria Bistar gol*. I have an idea: I think of burning a few incense sticks, which I hope will overpower the heathen smell of alcohol. However, my body refuses to move, let alone stand up and translate my noble idea into action. The general attitude of laziness in me has been encouraged time and again, buttressed by my indulgent perception of myself being an artist—a would be film director of international repute. I remember Somerset Maugham saying somewhere: "Art is merely the refuge which the ingenious have invented when they were supplied with food and women, to escape the tediousness of life."

My mind has begun to roam. I imagine what would have happened had Shiraz been at home. First, there wouldn't have been a booze party at all. Second, even if there was one, it would be a complete "vegetarian" affair—no booze, no noises, no mindless arguments, no adult jokes and everything would have got wound up by 9 p.m. Shiraz is a disciplinarian. Moreover, she does not tolerate what she does not like.

I gather she could be asleep by now or would be struggling with her fat, tedious and boring history textbooks. Did I tell you she is doing her graduation in history honours. You see, I am obsessed with Shiraz. I love her too much. Like a true Qais, I can't imagine living without her. She is with me. Always. Everywhere. I can see her dancing around me. While I am taking tea or having my food or even shaving my pubic hairs off, she is there with me. Even if I'm taking a nap, I can feel the sweetness of her kiss on my lips, my nape, my nakedness. She follows me like a spirit—in light and in darkness, in day and in night, even while I am crossing the road amid a mad traffic. She is waiting to embrace me. To make me drink her nectar. To feel the sweetness of her raspberry lips.

My obsession for Shiraz has become a joke among my friends. They don't even call me up any more. They have all left me with her—alone. The last time I had seen a friend, it was Ria and it was more than four months ago. She had come with her boy friend to meet us, the newly-weds. She had brought along a set of crystal bowls as a gift for us. While presenting it to us, she apologized for bringing it in a gift-wrap which was partially mangled by her dog. I wonder if her dog was too hungry! Ria, like a lot of her other upper middle class metro counterparts, loves dogs. She had at that time about a dozen canines in her house. She spends most of her time with them. The rest she spends with her boy friend.

Seeing Ria and her obsession with dogs, I had once thought of writing an article on this "strange obsession." In that article, I wanted to show that women learn to control men by learning to control a dog—kind of a Pavlovian exercise. I wanted to prove how men resemble dogs: they bark and brawl, are at times clumsy; when excited, they drool over you, they jump around, swish their tails and lick you all over, and blah, blah, blah... However, I did not write the piece for two things came my way: first, the fear that Ria would not like it; and secondly, my inherent laziness again proved overwhelming. But anyway, Ria was a real nice woman, so much so that her nicety (towards everyone) bordered on breeding a friendly contempt in me. This is why I had written to her on her 23rd birthday:

My dear swell face friend Ria
Everybody says you are so nice
But I guess you are cruel
By being nice to every Tom, Dick and Harry!

Ria had come when I was staying in one of the societies at Patparganj. It was just after my marriage, and we could stay in that apartment only about for a month. While Shiraz and myself were enjoying the "marital bliss," one evening the landlady called me in her drawing room. When I entered the room, she was pressing clothes with an electric iron. She looked serious, almost sullen. I was baffled to see her in such a mood as like most of the landladies in Delhi, she too used to be a happy and cooperative presence.

"What's the matter, Aunty?" I asked her.

"Mr. Akbar, you got to find a new apartment. As soon as possible," she said, putting the electric press aside, its steely whiteness sparkling.

"New apartment? As soon as possible? But why?" My reaction was instantaneous.

"I mean, we have just moved in!" I could not believe what she said.

"Because you are a brazen couple. Chee ... Chee ... the entire Society knows even what positions you guys practice," she said, arms akimbo, her sari's pallu tied tightly around her fat waist.

"Positions! we don't do Yoga Aunty," I tried to correct her.

"Not Yoga positions, dirty fellow! You even don't know how to ... how to ... love your wife in private," she said. Her face was lined with twitches of disgust. I immediately knew why the

ladies in the neighbouring balconies cast curious glances our way whenever we ventured out for a walk in the Community Park or went out for shopping.

I could not suppress my laughter. What a complaint, I wondered. I thought of the claims that try to establish how TV and beauty pageants had overturned the sexual mores of we Indians. The Indian middle class has yet to come out of its prudishness and a value system full of double standards.

So, she thought her reputation in the society had been soiled by our conspicuous passion. Initially, I was flabbergasted at her accusation but unfortunately, we had a room “with a view.”

The only window in our room put our privacy at the mercy of the voyeuristic gaze of those who inhabited the adjacent flats on the third and fourth floor. Unobtrusively, through their bathroom ventilators and kitchen exhaust, they had seen us naked, locked in the throes of passion time and again. Since most of these witnesses were women, whose sex lives were knocking at the doors of menopause, they experienced orgasms through their sharp tongues while they held orgies of gossiping. That proved fatal to us as tenants.

“Is it our fault if there are Peeping Toms around,” I countered her argument. “And if that is the case, we will take care in future, like may be we will put a curtain or something on the window,” I suggested beseechingly.

“No... No... Akbar, I’m sorry to say but it won’t do. You can’t stay here any more. See I have a good reputation in this colony and I can’t live here with a stigma on it,” she said, not convinced by my suggestion.

“But Aunt, why do you take these people seriously?” I protested. I still hoped to win.

“See Akbar, you don’t seem to understand the society. We are the only Muslim family in this locality. You know you won’t stay here for the whole of your life. So you can give them a damn. But we cannot. We have to survive here, live here till we die... amid our Hindu neighbours,” she said with firmness, trying to put the case to rest. She click-clocked the iron’s knob.

“*Theek hai* Aunt, if you think so, what can I do? Any way, how much time do we have here,” I enquired of her. I let go of all my arguments the moment I realized that they had entered the territories of religious sensitivities. Even if I hate religions for the dividing walls they erect amid people, the air of suspicion and distrust they create amid humans, I had to accept its stark reality: in India, religion is a bloody serious affair.

I should not endanger aunt’s existence here, I thought. She, like other Muslims living outside the religious ghettos, breathed the air amid Hindus and Sikhs, and felt very insecure especially when a political party with the Hinduvta philosophy was in power at the centre.

“It would be fine for me if you leave before the next month begins,” aunt said without looking at me. Now she tried to concentrate on the ironing of a pair of trousers.

It was almost the middle of the month. So, I had about a fortnight to look for a new house for myself—not an easy job in itself. And for a poor Muslim fellow like me, Delhi does not offer many options. My budget could not accommodate the hefty commissions demanded by property dealers, and they, when approached, did not have any property that fitted my wallet. For people like me, either destiny works or friends come to rescue. I am, like a common man, not strong on destiny’s side. But on the count of friendship, I am quite rich. I have Sanjiv and Anita. They would sure help me if I told them of my recent problem, I thought when I entered my room. Shiraz was looking down the window watching kids play cricket on the street in the twilight of the evening. Some kids were riding their bicycles and disturbing the tiny Sachins and Azzas.

I stole myself behind Shiraz and put my hands around her slim waist and kissed on her nape, which was exposed as her long hairs parted there. Slightly turning her head, she looked at me through the corner of her eyes with a smile. I gently pulled her away from the window and taking her into a corner of the room, kissed her on the lips. I had to break the news to her.

When Shiraz came to know about our imminent “exit form the heaven” and its underlying reason, she laughed it off with a shrug as if nothing had happened. Later I realized that may be she

wanted me to take it lightly. She said that “we are tenants and she (our landlady) is not doing us a favour by having us here in that capacity.” She had a point, I reckoned.

The next day I went over to Sanjiv’s place in Neeti Bagh. The drawing room of his two-bedroom flat was tastefully decorated. A pair of folding wooden chairs, quite classy in looks (“bought from Dilli Haat,” he informs me), a rug that covered half the floor and a diwan with a *gaw-takiya* created an aesthetically soothing atmosphere. In a corner, the recently bought Sony CTV was perched atop a covered tin box—it was the high altar that announced Sanjiv’s statement of style and acquisition. Near the entrance, a 165 ltrs Videocon refrigerator further demonstrated his being well off. His drawing room was a complete showcase of his success. In my mind’s eye, my drawing room (which was also my bedroom) looked more spartan than it ever seemed to me.

Sanjiv welcomed me with his usual style: a smile and a hug. “Shall we have drinks?” he asked me invitingly.

“No yaar Sanjiv! You go ahead, you know Shiraz...,” I excused myself. He knew about Shiraz and her hatred for drinks.

“C’mon man! This is why I always say that women are women, they change you!” he said, and a full-throated laughter burst out of him. I had to join him.

“*Thoda sa chalega...thoda sa...ekdum small...* boss, later you can take *Clorets!*” he said with an understandable squint in his eyes. They glared beneath his glasses.

“No boss, sorry...I can’t run the risk. If Shiraz gets the slightest hang of it, my night is spoilt,” I said with a wink.

“People have rightly said that there is no sin in sinning but in being found out,” said Sanjiv. Both of us laughed our heads off, hitting at each other’s palms. We immediately got transported to our JNU (Jawaharlal Nehru University) days. Over a period of time, from the salad days of JNU to the meatless days of a working life, our friendship was strengthened on a thick base of beef kebabs (that I had taught him to eat and relish), washed and watered down by the nourishing sensuality of rum and whiskey (that he had taught me to drink and appreciate). Sanjiv was of the firm belief that *'daru ki dosti'* is unbreakable. I tended to agree with him.

He took out a 1.5 litre bottle of Coke from his fridge, and poured some into a crystal tumbler (“a gift that I got in a press conference,” he had informed me) and handed it to me. He fixed his favourite rum cola for himself. Switching on the MTV, he looked at me quizzically. Both of us were sitting on the diwan.

“So Aks, tell me the whole story. You said on the phone you got some problem with your landlady,” Sanjiv asked me, taking a sip of his Coke-tail.

“Yes yaar... I myself am surprised at the sudden change in her behaviour. Last evening, she verbally gave me the eviction notice...I’m so harassed,” I said, skipping the why part of the story. But I knew he would ask about it.

And he did. Lowering the TV’s inane volume, he asked me, “did she give you any reason for this?”

Taking a gulp from my glass, I said, “Yeah, she did give me reasons but very nonsensical ones, you know such as water problems, noise and blah, blah, blah...” I tried to pass the issue over.

And so I added, “and the point is there was no use arguing with her. I have my own self respect yaar.” “And now the most important thing is you have got to find a place for us.” I waited patiently for him to say something.

After a while when I was about to take his leave, he suddenly jumped with an idea. “Aks, I have an idea man! I’ve a place in my mind. Hope you like it too,” he switched off the telly.

“A place—so fast; yes, tell me where, quick man!” I too was excited.

“How about this place—my place? I use only one bedroom. The other bedroom is free. Let’s share this place he said with a smile on his face. I was happier than astonished to confront such an offer. Sanjiv had ever been so generous to me. I felt like bowing in front of him. Such large-hearted friends are rare jewels on this earth.

“Won’t such an arrangement snatch your solitude, your privacy away?” I still had a doubt.

“No yaar, you don’t worry on this count. Rather, it would be a unique experience, sort of a communal harmony,” he assured me with a chuckle.

“You think over it and discuss it with Shiraz and then give your final decision me,” he further suggested.

That night when I threw the idea to Shiraz, she sounded sceptical: “Akbar, do you think it will work? Three people sharing a flat. More over, Sanjiv might be a friend of yours, but to me, he is more or less a stranger.”

“No. Shiraz, he is not a stranger. He is a close friend, a nice fellow. I’m sure we will get along well,” I tried to remove her doubts.

“May be but I don’t know,” she mumbled, battling a bout of sleep.

“C’mon Shiraz, it is just a matter of two months. Once your summer vacations are over, you will go back to the university and by the time you finish your studies, and come back to Delhi, I’d have shifted to a new house. Is that OK?”

In reply, Shiraz kissed me and I knew it was a stamp of approval.

One never knows things. Seriously. Because sometimes the worst of things happen at the worst of times. Now, what can you do about that? But the point surprisingly is—when it happens, it becomes doubly easy.