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Fortune-Teller

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“If you are seeing this video alone, that means I am already dead.” Rahul’s own voice from his phone being held by his wife Shivani, floated to Rahul’s ears.

Rahul groaned inwards. *So dramatic!* he thought, *why had I been so dramatic?* He wished Shivani would stop watching the video.

“Gimme breakfast *yaar*, I am getting late for the office. It is not good to be late on Monday, the beginning of the week. Please *yaar!*”

Shivani, sitting on the bed next to the mirror where Rahul was fixing his tie, turned her head towards him, but still refused to look at him directly. She hadn’t looked at him ever since she had come back from her parent’s house in Meerut.

“Why didn’t you tell me Rahul? We could have faced it together. Why didn’t you trust me?”

Rahul looked back from the mirror and saw tears streaking on Shivani’s cheek. He groaned again.

“Oh please enough. Can you please fix my breakfast? Where is Sonu Monu? Sonu Monuuuu.” Rahul called out to his kids but no reply came.

“Thank God, kids had insisted to go to Surya’s house. If they had seen it...” Shivani broke down again and started to sob into her hands.

“This is precisely the reason I hadn’t informed you. Drama! You would have made a scene. You hate all these so called superstitions. But I am telling you Shivani, this woman is good. She was the one who had told me “*upaye*”, which had helped me get promotion last year.”

Shivani didn’t respond but played the video again. Rahul walked away towards the kitchen in disgust to fix his breakfast himself. There was no arguing with Shivani when she got that way.

As he got out, his own voice drifted from the bedroom. Rahul stopped, stood there swaying side to side, listening to his own voice.

“Yesterday, I went to see this fortune teller...”

“I didn’t really go to meet her, mind you,” Rahul said. It felt silly talking to his phone, “I had gone to Crown Interiorz Mall to buy new shoes. These shoes are wearing out.” Rahul picked up his leg to show the fraying shoe into the camera. “but before I could go in to the shoes shop I saw Hemlata ji’s kiosk and I thought it had been a year since I had met her, I should at least go in and thank her.

I had met her last year, on a lark. She had told me to wear blue for a week and I would get promoted. I had laughed then. All the promotions had been done for the year and I knew there was no way I could get promoted, but then I thought there was no harm in wearing blue for a week... Except for listening to all the nagging from you, of course.” Rahul laughed.

“So I wore a blue shirt every day for seven days and listened to your grumblings for the last four of them but I didn’t tell you about her. Because I knew I would get much more grief from you, if you knew why I was doing it, than your griping about me wearing blue every day.” Rahul said, smiling.

“In any case, ten days later I got the promotion letter. Remember, how surprised I was? Hell! the whole branch office was surprised.

I never really went to her after that. Never really got a chance till yesterday. So yesterday when I went to the mall, I saw her kiosk and entered.” Rahul paused and took a deep breath. It was still unsettling.

“She told me that I will die before 10 am this coming Sunday, that is tomorrow. Now I don’t believe in these superstitious mumbo-jumbo either, but she was right the last time when she didn’t have any right to be right.

Also, this time she didn’t even take any money from me Shivani. Moreover, she refused to tell me any “*upaye*” to save myself. What is the point of scaring someone if you are not planning to make money out of it? This is what really scares me Shivani.” Rahul got up from the chair to get water from the kitchen.

All this talking had made him thirsty, or was it the spectre of his own death which had made Rahul's throat dry, Rahul didn't know.

“And do you know how I will die, according to her? From a *jharru ka teela!* Can you believe it? A mere piece of stick from a broom?” Rahul took a big sip from the bottle while talking to the phone camera.

“So first off, let me come clean, Raj is not getting married and there is no *daaru* party at our house. I lied so that you and kids were not around to see me going bonkers trying to save myself from my own created demons.” Rahul laughed again but it sounded hollow to his own ears.

“You know I am really lucky to have a wife like you.

You know what is funny? My friends lie to their wives so that they can have *daaru* party and here I lied to you about having a *daaru* party,”

Shivani's eyes welled up with tears again hearing these words. She remembered the last time she had seen Rahul...

Rahul struggled to pick the heavy suitcase to put it in Shivani's car.

“I don't understand. You will be back tomorrow evening. Why do you need such a big suitcase?” Rahul muttered.

“And you will never understand.” Shivani said shaking her head.

Men! They didn't understand these things. They were basically overgrown babies. They didn't need wives as much as they needed to be mothered. – Shivani thought.

“Now listen to me. Don't drink too much. OK? Otherwise the whole next day, you will walk around like a zombie, complaining about your headache. I won't be there till evening, so I won't be able to take care of you.

Do not put music too loud, especially after midnight. Don't go in the front balcony to smoke. Mrs. Sharma on that side is a bitch, she will again start complaining in the RWA whatsapp group. And for heaven's

sake please fix that pipe on the ac in the back balcony before your friends arrive. I don't want your friends to walk around my house with wet shoes and making a mess everywhere.

And please act as a good host this time. I know it doesn't bother you, but it's embarrassing to me OK?

What would your friends think about me? That I didn't teach you any manners? So please have everything ready before everyone comes. I have made all the clocks ten minutes fast so that you can be in time. And please, puhlease use the china bowls to serve snacks to your friends. I have taken them out and left on Kitchen shelf, so you don't have to go around looking for them." Shivani rubbed her forehead while remembering how mortified she had felt when she had found that Rahul had served his friends "chakhna" in steel plates. The amazing thing was, that afterwards, he still couldn't understand what the big deal was if he served his friends in steel plates... Men!

"I have told Shanti to come around noon so that she doesn't disturb you in your sleep. Aur AGAIN please thoda kam peena, baad me saara din gaate phiroge – hangover... hangover."

"Really lucky to have you jaar." Rahul said. It seemed to Shivani as if he was about to cry. She didn't understand why Rahul was acting like that, but then, she had never had a chance to face her own mortality and didn't know how people acted once they knew they were about to die.

"and drink lots of water, and stay hydrated. Enjoy yourself. And yes you ARE lucky to have me. Love you. Sonu, Monu wear your seat belts." Shivani said and started the car.

Shivani hadn't even reached Badarpur Toll when her phone rang. It was Rahul.

"Oh ho pati dev. Missing me already?"

"You miss those who are not with you but... you are always in my heart. How can I miss someone who is always with me?"

"Oh ho! dialogue, dialogue. Bolo! What do you want?"

"Where is the broom baby? I can't find it anywhere."

"Broom? What do you need the broom for? Are you sure this shindig is with your friends? Your MALE friends? Mr. Rahul Tyagi? I think I should come back right away."

“Arrey! I was keeping all the stuff on the dining table. Itna barra lecture jo de diya tha tum ne and a bottle of vodka slipped out of my hand and broke. Now there is glass everywhere.”

“Oh my God! Are you OK?”

“Oh yeah. I am not hurt. Just tell me where the broom is and I will clean it.”

“Baby the broom had gotten old. I had asked Shanti to throw it. She will bring a new broom on Sunday.”

Rahul was a silent for a second there.

“Hello?” Shivani said

“Oh ok, no problem then,” Rahul said.

“How will you clean it then?”

“Hmmm?” Rahul sounded distracted, “Clean what?”

“The broken bottle. Offo, I am coming back. You will cut yourself.”

“Oh no, no, no! I will clean it. I will use the pochha. Don’t worry. You go ahead.”

“Are you sure?”

“Haan haan.”

“OK then.” Shivani reluctantly agreed. Turning now meant that she would have to pay the toll again after all.

*“After you left, I rushed in the house to get rid of the broom. Na rahega baans, na bajegi bansuri.” Rahul laughed, “But I couldn’t find it anywhere so I called you. You said that you had already gotten rid of the broom. It was, as if, you knew that it could be dangerous to me. You are truly my soulmate yaar. Ummmmah.” Rahul puckered his lips and blew a kiss towards his phone, “Now we will see how a *jharru ka teela* kills me when it doesn’t even exist. Mua ha ha ha... Ow!”*

Rahul tripped on the beading at the entrance of his bedroom where the wooden floor of his bedroom met the tiles of the rest of the house. The phone flew out of Rahul’s hand and went under the bed. Rahul crept under the bed to get it. Worriedly, he picked up the phone. The phone was safe, the screen hadn’t cracked.

Rahul heaved a sigh of relief. The video was still running. The light from the screen bathed his face. In the reflected light from his face, Rahul saw something on the floor.

“Oh my God. A piece of *jharr...*”

Shivani took a sharp intake of breath as she saw Rahul in the video suddenly jerking his head up and hitting the bed with the back of his head. Meanwhile Rahul came back into the bedroom and sat beside Shivani. He didn't pay any attention to the video he had made only last night. Shivani didn't pay any attention to him.

She saw the phone slipping out of Rahul's hand second time in couple of minutes. The phone tumbled and, somehow, settled against the bed leg at an angle that it still kept on recording the prone form of Rahul. Shivani looked at the scene in horror, the back of her hand covering her mouth. Rahul laid there, not moving, the phone camera dutifully recording every non-movement of Rahul. Minutes passed. Nothing happened. All of a sudden, Rahul's pinky nearest to the camera lens stirred. Shivani breathed. She didn't know how long she had been holding her breath.

“Aaah!” Rahul said rubbing the back of his head. He picked up the phone and saw that it was still recording. He picked up the part of the broom stick which had startled him so much, “Almost killed me. I think I blacked out there for some time.” Rahul said into the camera as he stepped out on to the balcony, the one in the back, which was away from Mrs. Sharma's sharp eyes. He threw the small piece of stick from the balcony.

“Not today buster.” Rahul said to the stick which was lazily twirling down towards the ground.

While going back, Rahul noticed there was a puddle of water on the floor. Rahul looked up. The AC was running and the pipe attached to its drain seemed to be dripping right where it was attached to the ac. Shivani had asked him to fix it.

Rahul went to his bedroom, picked up a pair of scissors to cut the leaking part of the pipe, and went back to the back-balcony. Before opening the door, however, he stopped and backtracked, went to the other balcony, the one under the sharp scrutiny of Mrs. Sharma, and picked up the *pocha*. Shivani wouldn't like it if he made wet marks on her pristine floors.

As Rahul turned to go inside, he hesitated and slowly turned and looked back. There was another small piece of *teela*, which was lying right where *pocha* had been a moment ago. In a daze, Rahul bent down to pick it up. He twirled it around in his fingers in wonder, the *pocha* slipping from his trembling fingers. Rahul ran back to the other balcony to throw this piece of *teela* also. Midway to the other balcony he realized that he had been standing in a balcony itself and he could have thrown it from there only. He hesitated for a second and tried to calculate mentally which balcony was nearer, but then he mentally shrugged and ran towards the balcony which was the site of the dispatching of the first piece of *teela* he had found.

Rahul barged out of the door into the balcony to throw the cursed piece away. He promptly slipped on the puddle of the water, back of his head hit the window sill and he slid down to the floor. Rahul looked up and saw the scissors swirling and rushing straight towards his face, but thankfully before the scissor or the full impact of horror could hit him, he passed out.

Shivani sat there biting her nails. It was a full minute that the phone camera had been looking upwards and all she could see was the bottom of the AC and hear a slow hum going along with it. Rahul, sitting beside her, wanted to put his arm around her to comfort her, but he dared not, not knowing what will happen if he did.

“Oh Bhaiiin...” Shivani heard Rahul's voice. Finally, Rahul's face peered into the camera. He was bleeding profusely from his forehead.

“Oh crap!” Rahul cursed when he saw blood covering half of his face.

“That is twice in a row Shivani.” Rahul said, washing the blood from his face. The cut wasn’t as long or deep as he had feared, “I need to look for these *teelas* everywhere. It is already midnight. All I need is to find out a way to survive for another ten hours and I would be OK.” Rahul said looking at his wrist watch. “Ok Shivani. This is the last room.” Rahul said. He had looked at every inch of the floor of every bedroom with a magnifying glass which he had found in his kids’ room. That was a tedious job but it was still nothing compared to taking each piece of clothing out of every cupboard to search for non-present *teela* in them, then folding them and putting them back in.

“It is almost eight a.m. Shivani but I think it was worth looking at every room that thoroughly. I do not have to worry about those rooms now.” Rahul looked at his watch, “Only two more hours to go, my love.” Rahul sounded tired. Not only he hadn’t slept the whole night, but also the better part of it he had spent on his knees searching for his own death.

Rahul got up from looking at the floor of the living room as well as going through each deep crevice of every sofa and looked at the wall clock in the living room. It was just past nine thirty a.m. He put up his hands behind his back and stretched backwards to take the kinks out of his back, while breathing-in a sigh of relief. He stopped, however, before he could expel the air out of his lungs to finish the much needed sigh.

There was a small spider web in the corner of the living room. Right in the middle of the web, was a small piece of broom stick swaying gently back and forth to the rhythms of the fan as if taunting him, sticking its stick-y tongue out to mock him.

“Ok Shivani, only a few minutes are left before 10 a.m., and that is the only part of broom stick left in the house, I am sure.” Rahul said, while placing his phone in such a way that it would face where he would eventually put the folding staircase

It was a neat little staircase whose steps turned ninety degrees, when folded, to become parallel to the side legs.

Rahul pulled at the staircase leg to open it but it refused to budge. Rahul sighed and bent down to release the bottom rung from the plastic hook which stopped it from getting opened up.

Rahul got up on the staircase and tried to swipe away at the teasing piece of stick, but it was just out of his reach. He got down from the stair and looked around. He picked up one of the small metal cranes showpiece, which he and Shivani had bought from Surajkund Mela, and went up the stairs again. Rahul got to the top of the stairs and this time swung at the web with the metal crane. Metal crane was heavier than Rahul anticipated. The down arc of his swing made him slip, making him scrape his shins on all the three steps. Thankfully, Rahul landed on his feet but his head banged on the top step making the stair lean towards Rahul. The opposite foot of the ladder stood frozen in air for a moment and then crashed towards the other side. Rahul's head was in between two steps when the ladder snapped shut, the hook at the bottom biting into it and clamping its lonesome tooth on it firmly. The bottom of the step on the back of Rahul's neck felt sharp. The front of Rahul neck was pushed towards the rod which supported the lower step and choked him. Rahul struggled to breathe.

Rahul tried to move his neck sideways so that he could breathe but the sharpness of the top rung on the back of his neck persuaded him that it probably wasn't a good idea. He didn't want to cut open his jugular vein. He wasn't sure, where exactly it was but he knew enough that if it got cut, he would be dead in seconds, whereas loss of some air may give him some more time than that.

Rahul tried to push open the legs of the stair but he couldn't reach the plastic hook at the bottom. Every breath was a struggle. Rahul could see that fortune-teller's prediction was going to come true. He had come so close to defeating it. He had successfully thrown two pieces of sticks out of his house, even though he had come pretty close to dying while disposing them. Third time was, definitely, not a charm. All of a sudden, Rahul realized that he had come face to face with death those couple of times *while* he had tried to dispose of those stick pieces. If he had let them be, he probably would have survived. The room started getting dark around him. Rahul felt the need to fight leave him. He had been fighting for so long. The whole night he had been up and fighting. It was peaceful to not fight and give in.

Rahul slumped and sat on the sofa, the light-weight aluminium stair still hanging around his neck, and gave in to the urges of his body to go to sleep.

Dong! Dong! Dong! Dong! Dong! Dong! Dong! Dong! Dong!

Rahul stirred. His oxygen starved, sleep deprived brain tried to make sense of the loud sounds which were not allowing him to sleep.

A small piece of his mind which was still awake in deep recesses of his foggy mind sent a tiny thought of a message up from the depths of the greyness which threatened to engulf him totally.

‘It was ten a.m.’

It was important somehow but Rahul couldn’t remember why.

Shivani saw in horror while his husband slowly choked to death. He could only see Rahul’s face and his neck with the angle where phone was placed and it was slowly turning a sick blue colour.

Rahul, sitting besides Shivani, also looked on at the video, fascinated, even though it had happened to himself. He knew what was going to happen, yet he watched on, riveted.

Suddenly Rahul realized what the sound was. It was ten am. He had crossed the time limit. He couldn’t die anymore. That knowledge helped. There was still hope for him. He tried to open the stair again and realized that while sitting down, the angle was such that he could reach the bottom of the stair. The stair opened. Rahul breathed in the welcomed oxygen in great gulps.

After his breathing finally became normal, he picked up the phone and talked to it, “Shivani, I am saved. I think I won’t have to show this video to you ever. I wish you were here so that we could celebrate it together. But I guess I will have to do it all by myself.” Rahul laughed, a relieved laugh.

All the tension that had been storing up in his system since the time he had gone out of Fortune Teller’s kiosk finally left him, evaporating in thin air.

Rahul looked at the piece of stick gently swaying back and forth in the corner. It no longer looked as if it was mocking him. Rahul was finally able to see it for what it was – a simple piece of stick and not a venom spitting cobra.

Rahul unconsciously started humming the old famous Hindi song – Zindagi kaisi hai paheli haye (Life is such a puzzle). He thought he could understand how a convict would feel if at the last moment, just before the noose was to be put around his neck, he got clemency.

He had been granted a new lease on life. Rahul promised himself that he would use his remaining time on earth well. He would drink less, pay more attention to his wife, play more with kids etc. etc. ... but first he needed to celebrate winning this battle of life and death.

Rahul went into the kitchen.

“Finally, I am gonna have a drink as I falsely promised to you I would.” Rahul said to the phone, laughing, picking up a whiskey bottle from the bottom cupboard, but then kept it back.

“Even though it is a life changing victory, I think whiskey is too much for the morning,” Rahul said while taking a bottle of white wine out of the fridge. He poured it into a glass but he spilled some of it.

“Look at that! my hands are still shaking.”

He started pouring it again, but then stopped. He had seen something. Rahul peered into the bottle. He shook the bottle but the piece of stick at the bottom of the bottle still remained stationary.

Rahul laughed and put his fingers into the dent at the bottom of the bottle. He took his finger out and saw the piece of stick sticking to his middle finger. Rahul laughed again.

“You have no power over here.” Rahul laughed and jerked his hand outwards to get rid of the sticky stick.

He realized too late that he was holding the wine glass also in the same hand. He tried to arrest his movement but glass had already flown from his hand. He tried to grab at the flying glass, but ended up only hitting the bottom of the glass, which made it somersault in mid-air and the glass changed its trajectory. Meanwhile Rahul’s feet had slipped on the wine he had spilled before.

While his body was still in the air, Rahul saw the clock on the microwave oven. Words of his wife echoed in his ears – *I have made all the clocks ten minutes fast so that you can be in time.*

Shivani burst into tears while she watched Rahul slip and fall. The glass in his hand had fallen behind him. Rahul's head hit the shattered glass. A stream of blood immediately oozed out from below. The camera in Rahul's hand stayed stationary for a moment, loyally capturing everything, before making the whole kitchen tumble a couple of times and finally showing everything black.

Clock on microwave oven ticked and showed the time. It was 10:00.

Glossary

1. Yaar: Friend, colloquially used in India in place of Dude or man
2. Upaye: A ritual that is told by a fortune teller to do in order to ward off the bad effects of a planet.
3. Jharu ka teela: A stick which makes up a broom
4. Daar: Alcohol
5. Chakhna: small food items, such as nuts, you serve along with alcohol
6. Aur AGAIN please thoda kam peena, baad me saara din gaate phiroge: And again please drink in moderation, otherwise the whole day you will be singing.
7. Pati dev : Husband.
8. Bolo: Tell me
9. Itna barra lecture jo de diya tha tum ne: You had given me such a big lecture.
10. Pocha: A rag to mop and clean the floor.
11. Haan, Haan: Yes, yes.
12. Bhaiiii: A beginning of a popular Indian cuss-word
13. Surajkund Mela: A huge artisan fair that happens annually in Faridabad