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Ice-Cream

Aditi was sitting in the library, eyes fixated on the cobweb beneath the desk, absorbing its delicate intricacies. Just as she stretched her hand to touch it the bell buzzed announcing lunch time.

Back in the class people gathered around her seat talking to her bench mate Reha, she squished through them, picked her lunch and was about to turn when Reha said, “eat here, with us”, Aditi smiled politely and said she preferred to eat alone. Rohan made a funny face, “she’s a headcase”, he grumbled. Reha looked at Aditi as she made her way out of the group ignoring Rohan’s comment.

Reha took admission in PDA Public School midsession owing to her father’s transfer. Her dad, worked for a multi-national company whose new branch has just been put up in Rohtak. “The site is well chosen”, she heard him say, “Not too far from Delhi and new sectors are plotted out so there’s a good chance for us to secure a place in the posh part of the town”. A week ago when she stepped in the class for the first time, Aditi was the only person sitting alone, so she sat beside her.

“Hey”, Reha said, trying to sound as cheerful as she could possibly manage but still sounding quiet morbid.

“Hi. New admission?” Aditi inquired.

Reha nodded, fumbling with her wristband, its string came undone. Aditi lifted her hands and tied the strings together in a knot. Reha looked at Aditi and thanked her.

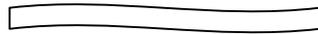
“You’ve got beautiful eyes, almost pale blue”, Aditi said.

Reha twitched the corners of her mouth, stifling a smile.

“It’s a compliment”, Aditi continued.

“I know, thanks” Reha blurted and started looking around nervously.

“Hey! New admission? Are you?” someone said from behind, Reha turned, “yes”, she said with a little nod. She smiled then.



Aditi was sitting on the red stone bench along the pavement, reading, Reha who has been playing basket ball with the others nudged her and said “come its real fun, you could read it later”. Aditi declined the offer. “Okay. Just give me the bottle”. She drank a little and took the bottle with her, Aditi checked time, twenty more minutes to go and they’d be done with the sports class, the sun was bothering her and she crept further down into shade. It was a clear day despite of the cloudy morning; October has always been Aditi’s favourite month when the sun mellows down and the heat is bearable, it’s the closest she has ever felt to the beautiful English summer which she’s been reading about ever since she was a little girl, but now one week down the line and October is as hot as June, not the English June obviously but our June, the kind where sun literally sucks up energy from your body with a straw like they show in that glucose advertisement which was also Aditi’s favourite.

“I ace at that sport”, said Reha, adjusting her hair sitting past Aditi on the pavement.

“You had fun?” Aditi asked.

“It’s just so cool. Promise me you’ll be there next time”.

Aditi looked at the floor and grinned. It’s a very Reha thing to say, to try and involve her in group activities so that they’d do something “fun” together and laugh about it when they’re older. That’s Reha’s way of moving through the world, she wants to create moments and memories which she’d look back on when she had nothing to do and she does it so seamlessly that it surprised Aditi. She had a row with Ms. Panghal in the computer lab last month when Aditi didn’t laugh at one of her lame jokes; the teacher said something about her always being sad and lonely. “She

is not sad or lonely, ma'am, she's just a quite person", Reha snapped, everyone looked at her, astonished at the unexpectedness of the comment. "Do you fancy yourself as her spokesperson Reha?" Ms Panghal said in a fake calm tone. "Do you fancy yourself as a shrink ma'am?" Reha replied and even before Ms. Panghal could utter the next words she was moving out of the lab.

Later in the hallway people were cheering and telling her how much they loved her attitude, really bold and sassy, "but you really didn't have to do that for Aditi", Yash said. Aditi was standing at a distance but heard them.

Reha said "I'll do that for all my friends".

Among other things, friendship was something Aditi had never savored before. She longed for it but believed that it lay in some other dimension and to reach there she has to extricate herself from her own being. She wanted to start anew, with new people, who didn't know that she had peed in her pants when she was five because she was too shy to ask for the teacher's permission to go to the loo or innumerable such things about her. All her life she has been going to the same school with the same people who were initially ignorant or sympathetic then ignored and even started disliking her. She herself didn't even like her, often while alone and doing something mundane like walking home from tuitions she'd engage in these fabricated scenarios in her head where she is the tall and skinny girl with the badge of "class leader" on the left corner on her shirt and a red belt on her waist. She is the teacher's favourite and is friends with most people. Almost every time the image resembles some girl like Kirti, Shruti or Rachel, she doesn't actually like any of them and when the trance breaks she wonders why she'd like to be the same people she wanted to get away from but no answer ever comes along her way.

"Okay, next time I'm up. Promise", Aditi said with a straight face.

Reha giggled then, "who are you even kidding? I know that's not your shit but do this one for me, okay?"

"What?"

"Night March" Reha said "it's just one night and it'll be fun. I know you don't like these people and the school and stuff but just come ok. We'll just get drunk and dance or just get drunk and do nothing and you won't even remember anything."

“Your friends will be pissed. You know they don’t like seeing you with me.”

“No, they just think you’re weird because you’re smarter than them, like you didn’t have to lick Mrs. Malhotra’s boots to get the highest in English and that bugs them off.” Reha said.

Aditi just nodded. She wanted to ask her why she’s friends with those people then but didn’t, she was already too confused by the dynamics of their own relationship and didn’t ever want to ruin it, so most of their conversations ended up with Reha talking and Aditi nodding, lots of questions take shape in her mind, they assume a real presence if she mull them over for a long time otherwise just submerge in the abyss.



Reha was in the pool playing a ball game, 1950 by King Princess was playing in the background. The water was slightly cold, she paused to rub her arms and felt little goose bumps appearing on her skin. Aditi was sitting on the edge, sipping gin that they’ve managed to sneak in water bottles, legs dripping in the pool. She was wearing a black swimsuit which she bought for the night march and her cheeks had a tint of red in them, she smiled at Reha when their eyes met, Reha mouthed “you look good”. Aditi made a gesture with her hands indicating she hadn’t understood what Reha was saying and jumped into the pool submerging her entire body in the water. When she surfaced again, Reha had moved closer. “I’m drunk”, Aditi said, smiling sheepishly, “it does feel good”, her hair was dripping water on her face, she looked at Rohan looking at them.

“He’s watching”, Aditi said, Reha turned over and waved to him, he waved back, “he likes you”, Aditi said.

Reha was looking right at her but didn’t seem to hear what she said, Aditi laughed then. “What”, Reha said. Aditi splashed water on her face, “you got distracted”, she said. Reha smiled her coy smile for a few seconds longer and said, “no, what? Wait, what?”

Just then music abruptly stopped and all the lights went off, the pool became dark, they could no longer see where anyone was in the pitch darkness. People began hooting and laughing, the PTI’s started blowing on their whistles making shrilly noises. Reha touched her hair, their faces were very close to each other and Aditi could feel her breathe. Everyone else was shouting to put the lights and music back on. Reha could smell Aditi’s cologne which

felt a little bitter along with fruit liqueur and chlorine. They let their lips touch slightly. The generator whirred. Aditi got out of the pool just as the lights came back on, she looked back, Reha was still standing there in the water looking up at her, they both smiled when their eyes met and Aditi moved towards the bathrooms.



Kirti: *they r riding!!!!*

Yash: *whaaaaa?*

Yash: *who?*

Kirti: *rhea n her girl*

Akshay: *reha and aditi*

Akash: *u should have seen them in pool. Hawt!*

Yash: *what? I missed out... Shit*

Akash: *the chemistry just killed me*

Shruti: *reha... I mean, you could've told us yr*

Rohan: *meethi h kya :(*

Kirti: *hahahahaha*

Kirti: *rohan lmao*

Rohan: *shit yrrrrrr*

Reha woke up to these texts in their group chat which Aditi wasn't a part of and replied *cm on guys! You could all do so much better*. She pressed a button and the screen turned black, she saw her own face in the screen, kept staring for a few seconds before switching it on again. Akash had sent a picture of them in the pool from last night, someone else sent some emojis. Reha dropped the phone and turned face down on her bed, her head felt heavy, wild fervours ran through her body and fizzled out like someone jerked up a bottle of carbonated drink with its lid closed.

The next day, Aditi saw Reha sitting with Shruti, she swallowed a distasteful lump down her throat and sat in her usual seat. During the lunch break Aditi turned and waved at Reha who was with her friends looking somewhat distracted but she avoided Aditi's gaze and said something to Rohan who let out a fake kind of laugh. First thing Aditi did after coming back home was text Reha *nice show today* two blue ticks appeared under the text on screen indicating that Reha had seen the message but Aditi didn't get any reply.



On Tuesday evening, Aditi was at Whirly, a fancy ice cream parlour that opened up in this complex at D-Park. She heard about this place from her brother, he told her how everyone was talking about it and she decided to go there. As she ventured in through the automatic doors, her phone rang the screen read Reha, she looked up towards the counter and back at the screen then swiped through the screen to answer the call.

“Hello”, Reha's voice sounded a little raspy, sending shivers down Aditi's back but she was also aware that she was blushing.

“It's okay if you don't want to talk. I don't deserve it anyway.” Reha said.

“No. Don't hang up”, Aditi walked past the chairs and stood at the counter. On the wall behind various items were popping up on the big screen in bright colours, on both sides of the screen were billboards announcing the names and prices of everything available there.

Both of them were silent for a long time. Then Reha said, “are you outside? I could hear noises.”

“Yeah. Whirly.”

“Oh”.

Aditi took the menu card laid on the counter and went upstairs. The stairs were carpeted and a little slippery, the railing was lighted with LED bulbs, she sat by the window, it was not dark yet but the street lights were on, cars were struck in traffic around the roundabout, people were queued up in front of Som Samosa Wala.

“What should I get?” she said in the phone. “I'm sure you've been here.”

“I haven’t.” Reha said, “but I’m very close by.”

“With your friends?” said Aditi, she kept the menu on the table, the words lay flat on it; she didn’t try to read them.

“No, alone”, Reha said. There was a long pause, Aditi said something like ‘hm’ and coughed. “Are you sorry for me?” said Reha slowly.

“We haven’t seen each other in a month, you ignored my messages and you’re probable calling because none of your friends are around. So no, I’m not sorry for you... not for myself either.”

“You don’t know everyone was talking shit about us.”

“Well, nobody told me that because you were the only person that talked to me... why have you called?”

“It’s hard okay and not just for you. I know I did you wrong but I...” Reha couldn’t say that this was the best thing that she could do because it clearly wasn’t but she couldn’t explain to Aditi why she behaved like that when she herself didn’t know.

She remembered the warmth that flushed her cheeks because of the blood rush whenever they were together, she told Aditi about her life in Bangalore like she told the others and saw that her eyes never flickered at the name as if she was opening the gateway of some another more exciting world for her, Aditi listened to her stories just because they were her stories, she was a part of them and that was enough for her. There was nothing weird between them ever, even the moment they had in the pool was not weird, it was sort of surreal rather, almost mystical and beautiful of course. The realization that other people ruined something that was theirs, something they shared together, stung her hard and she couldn’t speak.

“You know the first day you came to school” Aditi said “you probably don’t remember but I complimented your eyes, I’d normally not do that, I don’t go around telling people what I like about them. I don’t always behave very rationally around you and maybe this is also not a very rational thing to say but I would like you to come here.”

Back in October, Reha convinced everyone to delete their photo. She managed to turn the conversation around, told everyone how Aditi was sick that night and she was just helping her and since Aditi stopped coming to school after that everyone believed her, people eventually stopped talking about them, her parents never came to know about

anything. She didn't know how they'd react if they heard, they probably wouldn't believe it, things didn't work like that for them; their world was black and white they couldn't ever suspect that their daughter was treading the rainbow lane. She herself couldn't suspect it but found the path too beautiful to let it go.

“Get an ice cream for me then”, Reha said.