

## The End

I stood there, horror-struck.

Beads of perspiration lined my forehead as I stood, in a dirty torn shirt with the top three buttons missing, the pocket almost ripped off and blood on the shoulder. The right leg of my jeans was covered with semi-wet clay, while the other was covered in blood from the wound in my thigh. My chest felt as if it could not contain the uncontrollable beating of my heart.

She stood there, five feet away—the gun in her hand pointed at me.

The situation outside did not offer any hope of rescue. Sounds of gunshots, grenades, shrill cries and screams filled the polluted air of Kolkata. Full-scale riots had erupted and the police were everywhere. Given the choice, anyone with sense would be at home on a day like this. Sadly, I didn't have a choice.

“I was so wrong about you.”

“From the beginning.” She responded without emotion. Her hair was neatly done and she appeared calm and at ease. The fighting outside didn't distract her as she took a step towards me—probably to make sure she didn't miss her mark.

“We can still settle everything. Can't we talk?” I pleaded as I realized that this might be the last conversation of my life.

“There is no 'we'. I know what I am doing and nothing can stop me.” I gazed at her despairingly. She was cold and unemotional; nothing I said seemed to have any effect on her.

“Okay, then. Go ahead. Shoot me,” I replied hopelessly.

The pain from the bullet in my leg was nothing compared to my fear of death, but I knew there was no stopping her. I closed my eyes and waited.

“Very well then.” The gun fired and I felt myself falling.



# My Accursed Enemy—the Alarm Clock

What's the sound you most hate while sleeping? Is it the neighbor's dog barking, an early morning marketing call on your mobile phone or the sound of your mom's voice trying to get you out of bed? For me, it's the sound of the stupid alarm clock. It always manages to get under my skin, signaling the end of a beautiful sleep, and the beginning of another meaningless day. In my case, this particular day, it was just another meaningless day, three days into my third year of university.

I mustered enough energy to raise my head from the pillow and switch off the alarm. Today would be my first day at university—because I had missed the last two days going to Eden Gardens to see the cricket match between India and Sri Lanka.

Once I was ready, I went out to find mom as usual, furious with dad for something or the other. Dad had just bought fish—at what she claimed was double the normal price.

“This fish is worth it,” my father insisted.

“That's what you say,” came my mother reply.

I went forward and gave mom a hug.

“It's already nine-thirty and your college starts at ten-thirty. Are you planning to go or should I prepare lunch for you as well?” mom asked.

“Fifteen minutes, Mom.”

She didn't bother answering and started peeling vegetables for the fish curry.

I went back to my room, changed into jeans, put on the same t-shirt that I had been wearing for the past three days (none of my college friends had seen it, so who cared), grabbed my backpack and was ready for college.

I ran my own small content development agency, and that morning I needed to send sixteen articles to a client of mine. I worked on my laptop and sent them while having a breakfast of bread, butter and sponge *rosogolla*.

“I got fish fresh from the shop,” said dad, with his eyes on the newspaper.

“Everyone gets them fresh in the morning,” came mom’s reply from the kitchen. “You aren’t special.”

I grinned to myself; these snippy little chit-chats always made for an entertaining breakfast!

I reached my college, Jadavpur University, just in time. My college was not too far from my place. Measured in iPod terms, it was a song’s distance from my house to the auto stand and then two songs from there to the college. Occasionally, the number of songs rose if the auto got stuck at a red light at the crowded, and much-hated, Jadavpur Police Station crossing.

I got to campus and was greeted by the group of guys who always sat around the entrance; these guys had nothing better to do except talk about politics and chew tobacco. I wondered whether they actually studied here, because I had never once seen them cross the main gate to actually go inside.

Our college has a long-standing policy of mixing up students in the various sections. Some said it was done to increase fraternity among the students, while others said the main objective was actually to hinder growth of unity among students. We called it the ‘Divide and Rule’ policy. I was not really involved with either the management or the students, so didn’t really care; after all, the rule didn’t really impact me.

I checked the notice board:

Names starting with	Section	Room
A-D and M-P	CV 1	11
E-H and Q-T	CV 2	12
I-L and U-Z	CV 3	13

“CV1 for me.” I said to myself.

I dragged myself to room eleven, which was identical to the room I had last semester; three columns, a projector, a big white board, and a platform for the teacher. For those who wanted to, the large hall provided abundant opportunity to make disparaging comments about the teachers. I remembered some of the epithets that were given to the teachers—Stripper for the language teacher Ms. Jenny Strip, Jack Sparrow for the mathematics teacher who swayed from side to side while

writing, Harry Potter for Harish Poddar and Taxi Meter, my favorite, for Mr. Ranjan Mitter. I stretched—it was good to be back. And what I loved most about the classroom was the air conditioning—it provided the perfect environment for me to complete that unfinished sleep.

\* \* \*

I recognized many familiar faces in the classroom. This semester, once again, I had already abandoned any hope of making new friends. I was not a college socialite, although I was quite regular in my attendance and a few people knew who I was. There were people in my section whom I knew courtesy their academics like Brishti, Ayan, Nishi and Dipak—all nine-pointers. Then there were the rowdy types—Manjeet, the guy with a headphone jacked into his ears twenty-four-seven and then there was a guy whose claim to fame was owning an iPhone. I didn't know the names of many of them, and I didn't care if another year passed without me knowing them either.

I saw a group of girls gossiping in the middle of the class; some called them the HotShots. I knew three of them—Ankita Roy, Ankita Nandy and Jaya Das. I looked around for Asha—one of my closest friends since childhood—but she was nowhere to be seen.

After the first class, I dropped in at the canteen; something seemed to be going on there that day.

“Hey Anand,” someone pulled me from behind. “Good to see you.”

It was Rahul.

I never knew how to respond to these mundane greetings and wondered how good he really felt to see me. I decided to play the game. “I'm good. Heard you got nine points this semester.”

I knew this was not what he wanted to hear. Rahul would have liked to ask me how much I got and then expect me to ask him the same, so he could bask in the glory of being a nine-pointer for some time. I wanted to deny him that pleasure.

“Yeah, I don't know how I got them.” The success of my ploy was clear from his expression. He decided to change the subject.

“The Telegraph is running some sort of survey at the student center. Let's go there and check it out,” he said.

≈

## The Newspaper—A Turning Point in my Life

We reached the student center and saw a small crowd of over-excited students that had gathered. Some of them had already been interviewed by the T2 guys and were in a state of bliss, having achieved a social summit.

T2 was the entertainment section of The Telegraph newspaper and the reason many woke up early in morning. Since its inception, it had been a huge success among the youth as well as the golden-agers. Personally, I looked forward to the images of those poor blonder ladies who didn't seem to have a penny to spend on clothes, but had enough money to own private jets! Some of Megan Fox's photographs are still there under the winter clothes in my wardrobe. Looking at them gave me many hours of happiness; I admit I often did more than just look.

"We will take only two more interviews. Does anyone have anything interesting to say about how the youth of today can make some extra pocket-money?" said a lady who was surrounded by a throng of students.

"Why don't you go?" said Rahul and without bothering to wait for my reply shouted, "Here, here!"

A professor who knew me was standing nearby. "Yes. Interview this boy. He does some writing thing on computers," she said.

The T2 woman came towards me and said briskly, "Tell me about it. If it's good enough you might find it in the newspaper tomorrow."

"Tell her about it, you idiot. Turn dumb later," Rahul urged me.

"Oh, it's nothing. The Internet needs gargantuan amounts of content every day. It can be anything, from 'what are the latest Android phones' or 'how to have sex for the first time'. I have some clients who need such content. I connect them to writers who write that content and make a reasonable amount of money."

"How much do you earn per month?"

“It can be anything between ten thousand and fifteen thousand rupees.”

She took down my name, clicked a photograph and vanished.

I thought no more of the episode.

\* \* \*

I returned to my class, survived the next couple of classes and went back home. Mom had cooked the fish that Dad had brought that morning. Her culinary skills were legendary—and dinner at home was always the best meal of the day.

I had to deliver many articles that day, and was ready for a busy night. After sending out the requirements to the writers I worked, with I still had a lot of work left over. I realized that I had more work than I had writers. I put an online ad out for content writers asking them to reply via my Facebook page.

The T2 thing remained at the back of my mind till I went off to sleep.

\* \* \*

Morning came early for me the next day. I jumped out of bed and rushed to the breakfast table.

“A poor guy from a slum has ranked two-hundred and thirty-fourth in this year’s...”

I cut short my father’s daily headline reporting, saying I had to search T2 for some ‘personal’ news. My father was generally a calm person, but the interruption upset him.

“What is this personal news? All you read in the newspaper is when which movie is going to be released and why Salman broke up with Kareena.”

“It’s not Kareena, Dad, it’s Katrina.” I don’t know why I corrected him because I knew he would continue to make the same mistake.

I took the T2 and quickly browsed through the pages. There it was—my photograph along with the interview. It was printed on page fifteen. I was so delighted that I cried out, “Look—your son is a celebrity now! He is on T2!!! And he is the only one from the college whose comments are published!”

“On what?” my mother enquired.

“On T2, Ma, T2. It’s the most happening newspaper magazine in town and I am in it. These people came to our college yesterday and interviewed some of the students. Of course, I didn’t think I would make the cut, but see—they must have realized that I have it in me to become a youth icon! Where’s my cell phone? I need to check my inbox. It must be flooded with congratulatory messages by now.”

I felt like I didn’t have to carry the burden of being a loner in college any more. I could imagine my teachers having a conversation amongst themselves about how inaccurate they had been in appraising my capabilities. My cell phone was lying beside my laptop. I picked it up—thirteen unread messages.

I touched the mail icon. Ten of those messages were from the network provider, two from my clients and one from Rahul. “Hey it appeared. Congrats.”

Obviously no one woke up so early in the morning. I could hardly wait to get to college. Everybody would be talking about me. God! How hyped up I was! I got dressed and set out.

The classroom was full of students. I entered with my head held high, ready to be congratulated by all and have words of praise heaped on me. I sat at my usual place—the second last bench. I saw Abhishek marching towards me.

“Hey did you check the readings from the Material Testing lab?”

“What readings?”

“What were you doing the whole day yesterday?”

I had an aching desire to present Anand, the T2 Star. But before I could open my mouth, he left, leaving me stranded without a chance to expound on my newfound celebrity status.

The HotShots were, as usual, engaged in a very serious conversation. I walked towards them, pretending to pick up a book from the teacher’s desk.

“Yes, and you know he is going out with Esha every night,” said one Ankita to the other Ankita.

They were not talking about me! But where was Asha? Should I ask about her and then tell them about my achievement or should I wait and see whether the teacher came and announced my name to the class? I

had always been self-conscious about talking to girls, let alone the HotShots. So I did what I thought best—returned to my place.

The teacher entered and started talking about water resources engineering. No recognition for me yet. *Everyone reads T2 in my class, especially the girls. How come they didn't see my photo in it? They must have seen it but were not acknowledging it. People can be so jealous.*

\* \* \*

Two days passed by and this whole T2 episode started to fizzle out. I was editing some articles, one of which was about Facebook. That reminded me that I had to check my Facebook account, which had not been opened for a few days, for responses to my ad for writers. To be honest, I found it extremely boring and useless; but I had an account because everyone else had one. I couldn't understand why people were glued to it all the time. I logged into my account.

I saw three notifications, zero friend requests and one personal message. Two of the notifications were from my clients and one was a notification of me getting tagged to a picture of a cat playing the piano.

I opened the personal message—it was from Nili Agarwal.

*Hey how are you? I read your interview on T2 and saw your ad. I love writing and would not mind working with/for you. Let me know the details.*

*Thanks*

*Nili*

Was this the same Nili Agarwal in my college? Her display picture was of Emma Watson and her other photos were locked. Her profile stated she was in the third year of civil engineering in Jadavpur University.

Yes. It was her.

I replied:

*Thanks for the interest. Please contact me on my personal email id, anand\_the\_rockstar@gmail.com, for further details.*

*Regards*

*Anand*

Nili was an extrovert and NRI from Dubai. But she was not like the Indian girls who are born and brought up in foreign countries—the kind so often portrayed in Hindi movies as being proud and haughty and getting laid every second night; or is it every night? On the contrary, she

was like any other girl in our college—apart from the small fact of her arriving at university every day in a chauffeur-driven BMW.

Nili was a hot topic from the moment she joined the college. All the college hunks tried to catch her attention, while most of the girls were jealous of her. She looked very neat and glamorous in whatever she wore—a *salwaar kameez* or jeans with a plain round-necked shirt. She was friendly with everyone in our civil engineering batch, while I didn't know ten percent of them. She was tall, fair, slim with burgundy colored hair, and was easily the 'girl to woo' in college.

I logged out of Facebook after browsing through some photographs—friends hanging out with their friends, friends hanging out with their girlfriends, friends clubbing, friends partying, friends boozing and friends doing nothing. I couldn't understand how they had the time or the interest to do all this. It was not that I didn't want to party, but it was just that it didn't bother me if I didn't party or have less than a hundred and fifty Facebook friends.

Beep! An email from nili\_agarwal92@gmail.com.

*Thanks for the prompt reply. I am very interested in the work. Please send me details as to how we can proceed. I have sent you a chat invite as well. Please accept.*

*Nili*

I felt a rush but reminded myself to 'treat her like any other writer'. I accepted her chat invite and saw her come online on Google Talk.

She was the first to enter a message.

'Hey!' She typed.

'Hello,' I replied, not sure of how to proceed.

'Thanks for accepting the chat invite.'

'You're welcome.'

'I read your interview on T2. I really like what you are doing. Instead of wasting your evenings on friends, Facebook or some other crap, it's a lot better to do something constructive.' Her typing was alarmingly fast—almost manic.

'Thanks again.' Why did I write 'again'? I was saying thanks for the first time. I hoped she didn't notice .

'I found out that we're in the same section. I didn't know this before. In fact very few people do.'

‘Yes. I’m not very sociable. And I try to keep my work and friends separate.’ I was waiting for her to stop, so I could start on the more important things like how to write the articles.

‘So does that mean that I am not eligible to write?’ she asked. ‘I have been fond of writing since childhood. I don’t want any money. Just want to be sure that my work is published with my name.’

‘It doesn’t work like that. I will pay you for your work.’ It’s not like we were friends; I hoped I sounded professional.

‘Oh. Okay. So how do we start?’ she enquired. At last, we were talking about the work.

I described the complete work process to her—she had to write her own unique articles, she couldn’t copy from a website or any other source, she had to follow all the guidelines, and last but not least, she had to submit the articles within the deadline set by the client. She agreed to everything immediately.

‘If I have any doubts can I call you and clear it?’ she asked.

I was a bit hesitant at first but I hurriedly wrote ‘yes’ and gave her my number.

‘Thanks.’

I heaved a sigh of relief when she didn’t give me her number. It would have made me even more uncomfortable.

‘After you work for fourteen days, I will give you your payment. Your first few articles will be trial pieces. So best of luck! I am logging off now. I will send your first assignment in five minutes.’ I mailed her two easy articles along with the writing guidelines and then closed my laptop.

I didn’t want to think about it. I didn’t want to think about her.

\* \* \*

The next day I called up Asha. Her number wasn’t reachable. I wondered when she would be back from her holiday. I got ready and left for college.

When I got to the college, one of the first people I saw as Nili. She was walking towards the canteen with a bunch of girls. I wasn’t ready to meet her and I did not want her to come and talk to me about work or anything else; I was afraid she would find out that I was an awkward loner. She waved.

I looked around to see who she was waving at; there was no one behind me. *Is she waving at me?* By the time I decided that she had waved at me, she had entered the canteen.

I didn't attend the last two classes that day as I had to send quotations for a very important project. I returned home and started working. Nili was supposed to send her articles by seven pm. But it was not until close to midnight that I got the completed articles from her. I didn't know what I wanted at the time—whether I wanted her articles to be full of mistakes or be perfect.

I started reading the first article. I still remember the topic. It was 'How to propose on a first date and get a yes'. I checked it through a plagiarism checker. It was hundred percent unique and the English was excellent. I checked the article with the guidelines. The keywords weren't put in bold, there was no meta description, there were five subtitles instead of four and the keyword 'get a yes' was not repeated three times in the article.

While her English was impeccable, and the quality of her writing was brilliant, she didn't seem to be able to follow instructions. Her article wasn't going to be accepted—not by me, let alone the client. It took me six minutes to correct it and by the time I finished reading it, I was confused about what to do with her.

'How is it?' she messaged me on Google Talk.

I wanted to be very strict and straightforward. 'It's beautifully composed. Very well done.' Before she could type her reply, I added 'But the guidelines were not followed and the deadline was not met. I will make the corrections this time but please do keep these things in mind the next time. I will send the next project soon.'

Where had this generosity come from? I had never corrected a writer's article before. I always sent them back.

'Sure, Sir.'

Was there a hint of sarcasm in that?

\* \* \*

Days passed and Nili's articles got better. She understood the requirements but never submitted articles on time. I didn't complain as her elegant language compensated for the extra time that she took for

writing. In fourteen days, she wrote twenty-two articles and all of them were accepted by the clients. It was time for her first payment.

‘Hi,’ I texted her. We still communicated only over Google Talk. Thankfully, she hadn’t called me yet and I had managed to avoid her in college where she hung out with her group of friends.

\* \* \*

‘Hey!!! How are you?’

‘It is time for your first payment. You are getting paid Rs. 5,500.’

‘Oh really? Give me the dough tomorrow then. Actually, even if you don’t pay me it’s okay because I enjoyed writing the articles so much.’

There was something about her that was stirring me up. ‘Good, I like your work too. But you have to be paid. Please send me your bank details so that I can send the money to you.’

‘What! No way, man. I want it in cash. I don’t want to get into banks and all. Just give me the money tomorrow. I will be waiting for you at the canteen after the structural analysis class. GTG. Bye!’

She logged off before I could send her my reply. Hey, wait a minute. Was she dictating terms to me?

The next morning I went to the ATM and drew out six thousand rupees.

I thought of sending the money with someone else; but then I thought it would help reset the balance of who was in charge if I gave her the money myself. I reached the canteen and saw her surrounded by some guys from the other section. There was no way I was going to give her the money right then. I turned around and started walking away.

“Anand!” came a scream from behind. It was Nili. Oh God! Would I have to give her the money in front of those guys? What would they think? She said something to them and then came towards me. I stood rooted to the spot. I had no idea what I was going to say.

“Let’s go someplace else.” She hurried away towards the central campus park. I followed her quietly.

“So what’s up?” She had an intriguing aura of self-confidence as she took a place on the bench and indicated I should sit next to her.

“This is your payment.” I wanted to get it done with as soon as possible. “Keep working hard.”

I gave her the money, got up and started walking away. Nili had an unsettling effect on me and I knew the longer I stayed, the more confused I would be. “Talking with a girl is so easy,” I joked to myself as I walked away, fighting the urge to look back.

