

ONE

June and Delhi do not complement each other and the taxi queue at Delhi Airport was the closest to hell one can get. Gautam stood as patiently as he could in the forty five degree heat with his BBM beeping every two seconds and the fat lady behind him poking his heels with her overloaded airport luggage trolley. The line wasn't moving and the lady kept trying to push her way through despite the menacing looks he gave her every now and then. He swore under his breath. He would have to haul up the office guys for not arranging a personal pick up for him at the airport.

Except, he wasn't here on an official trip; he was here to attend his best buddy Sanjay's engagement. The thought only further aggravated his mood. He hated 'big fat Indian weddings' and was sure Sanjay's wedding would be bigger and fatter than any he'd endured. There was no way he could wiggle his way out of this one.

A commotion nearby jolted him out of his thoughts. Several taxi drivers had gathered around a single taxi and were listening spell-bound to the complaints of one passenger, a drop-dead beauty in a summery, pink, floral dress and towering high heels. None of her bags would fit in the boot of the taxi as most of the space was occupied by a CNG cylinder. Despite the heat and the delay, she looked cool and affable, smiling at the driver and speaking calmly about her problem.

She seemed to have a strange effect on him; his body was taut with unexplained tension, and the more she smiled, the more irritated he felt. While he fretted in the heat, she seemed to be Miss Congeniality personified. The fact that someone else was coping better under the circumstances made the usually rational Gautam irrationally indignant.

He knew her kind, a pretty young thing with the brains of a butterfly whose biggest disaster in life would be the chipping of one of her perfectly painted nails; losing a favorite earring would most certainly translate to unmitigated trauma.

Thankfully, the issue was resolved finally, with the girl deciding to sit in the front seat, with her luggage stowed in the rear passenger seat. In the meantime, Gautam's cab came cruising along and he jumped into its air-conditioned cocoon for much needed, though temporary, respite.

The memory of the girl lingered with him.

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Sanjay's family farmhouse in Mehrauli looked like a set straight out of a Karan Johar movie, with swathes of silk and huge arrangements of exotic flowers everywhere. The place teemed with men in different degrees of agitation, screaming out orders and putting last minute plans and changes in place. Though Gautam had expected the chaos, he was ill-prepared to participate. Squinting through the sun, he noticed a couple of his school friends.

"Mihir, Rohan, how are you, buddies?"

"*Wah*, Gautam. Good to see you *yaar*. Long time. How have you been?" Rohan was his exuberant self.

"Same to same, I would say," said Mihir. "*Apna* Gautam is looking as dashing as ever. All set for the *hungama*?" The friends guffawed with laughter, laced with memories of a shared past.

Gautam's lack of ease at social gatherings was legendary but for a Punjabi boy from an affluent Delhi family, it posed a mammoth obstacle. Just as his friends began their incessant chatter about the past, he saw somebody familiar; standing before him was the girl from the airport.

Was she following him?

Before he could react, Sanjay came up to him, boisterously yelling in his ear, "How have you been? *Yaar*, I am so happy to see you." He clasped Gautam in a tight bear hug, "Tanya's best pal is here, *yaar*, I was beginning to feel really lost without my best friend."

Sanjay stepped back and took a long look at Gautam. "Looking good, boss. This corporate attire suits you. When was the last time we met? Where is your luggage? *Arre*, wait. Let me first introduce you to my fiancée."

He called out to a pretty girl who had walked across with him. "Tanya, honey come and meet Gautam."

Tanya was a sweet-looking petite girl with elaborate *mehendi* on her hands; in her short hair, denim shorts and a pink tee she looked like a schoolgirl.

“Hello Gautam.” She wrapped her heavily *mehendied* arms around Sanjay. “I’ve heard loads about you. We’re both in Mumbai, yet we haven’t met. I hear you keep very busy and don’t socialize much, but don’t worry, now that we have met, I’ll make sure you have a rocking time in Mumbai.”

“Congratulations Tanya,” said Gautam.

The match seemed to be made in heaven for the two warm, happy, talkative people.

He turned around at the sound of laughter and found the girl from the airport coming towards them with another guy. Gautam winced, annoyed at the irrational jealousy he felt. The strength of his feeling, compounded by the fact that the emotion had been aroused by a stranger, confused him.

“Sanjay, who is that girl?”

“Oh that’s Sameera, Tanya’s childhood friend. They are quite inseparable.” Sanjay winked at Gautam. “Isn’t she gorgeous? She’s also from Mumbai.” His grin spread. “I have a great idea—why don’t I try and set you up with her? Double dates, just like high school. What say?”

Gautam stiffened. “You’ll do no such thing. I hardly dated even in high school; don’t embarrass me in front of your guests.”

Sameera came and stood beside them, tucking an errant strand of hair behind her left ear. Gautam’s gaze lingered on her beautiful slender fingers with their perfectly manicured nails. Tall, slim, with broad shoulders and an amazingly narrow waist, she looked even prettier up close. Her dark, long, softly curled hair, limpid eyes heavily lined with *kajal*, glowing complexion, and wide, pink lips made her look incredibly sensual.

“Excuse me, but could you please stop monopolizing the bride and groom? There’s an awful lot to be done. The function’s just a few hours away, you see,” Sameera seemed to be speaking to him. “Why don’t you also go and freshen up? And yeah, please try to change into something more appropriate; it’s a wedding, not a board room.”

Tanya giggled but Sanjay jumped to his defense, “Sameera don’t bully the poor guy. He *just* got here. Let’s go, buddy.”

As Gautam picked up his bag, he heard Sameera comment, “‘Poor guy’? That’s what we’ll call him since he hasn’t bothered to introduce himself. Uff. Are all Delhi guys boorish and ill mannered?”

The comment was the last straw for Gautam. Here he was, trying hard to be civil amidst the chaos while that girl, a complete stranger, was taking liberties with him and had the nerve to call him ill-mannered. She should look in the mirror.



TWO

Finally alone in his room, Gautam heaved a sigh of relief, thankful for the privacy of a single room. He quickly locked the door, flopped on the bed and took a long deep breath. He checked his watch; there was time for a few hours of work on his laptop before the pandemonium of the engagement ceremony broke loose. The heat had taken its toll; his body and his internal organs felt like they were coated with the grime and dust of Delhi. He stepped into the shower, a fancy cubicle with lots of mirrors that reflected his muscular five-eleven frame and chiseled features—what his friends called the ‘Adonis’ look. His only concern was his thick unruly mop of curly hair which he kept really short. He was well-groomed with thick eyebrows and dark brown eyes that complemented his wheatish complexion and clean-shaven face.

Lathering his broad chest, his thoughts reverted to work and the presentation he had to complete before landing in Mumbai the next day. Suddenly, through the misty space in which he stood, Sameera’s gorgeous face appeared in his mind and he felt a deep urge to smell her cascading hair and gaze into her large eyes. He was used to pretty girls vying for his attention but never before had a girl aroused conflicting emotions in him as Sameera did.

Someone was knocking loudly on the door. Caught in his thoughts, Gautam tried to ignore it but the knocking continued vehemently. He cursed under his breath, grabbed a towel and wrapped it impatiently around his waist, still dripping wet.

His thoughts, it seemed, had come alive. Sameera stood at the door, a plate of food in her hands. She calmly handed it to him and left, her high heels clicking on the marble floor.

Gautam felt violated. She should have announced herself. While he stood there, half naked and dripping wet, his mouth open, looking physically and metaphorically like a fish out of water, she had taken the moral high ground. And—she even shook her head at him.

For a second he thought he was dreaming but the heady mixture of Sameera's fragrance and the aroma of the choicest of Punjabi sin food—*samosa, gulaab jamun* and *chole bhatoore*—was all too real. He stood dumbfounded with the plate in his hand and his heart in his mouth. Another wave of outrage ran through him. *What does she think of herself?* He put the plate down on the table and sat on the bed. *Any other girl would have been embarrassed and apologetic, but not this one. Supercilious freak.* He shook his head in disgust. *Damn. To think I was attracted to this butterfly, ice maiden, rather. Serves me right.* He dipped a *samosa* in green chutney and a smile spread over his face. His mobile rang and for the next few hours Gautam was engrossed in work.

At about five-thirty in the evening, there was another knock on his door. Once bitten, and still in his towel, he did not dare open the door without further information.

"Who is it?" he yelled.

"Open the damn door, you @\$%!. Have you come here to lock yourself in your room?"

Gautam opened the door to a red-faced Sanjay.

"Oh. So your laptop's on too. Excellent, Mr. Highflier. Here you are, slogging your ass off on a one-day leave while useless people like me waste time getting married." Sanjay poured himself a glass of water. "You know what, buddy? I would give an arm and a leg to get someone as dedicated as you to work for me."

"You won't be able to afford me bugger," Gautam laughed heartily. "Just cool down, champ. Your penchant for theatrics has not reduced over the years. I'll be finished in two minutes and then am all yours for the rest of the evening." Gautam looked at his friend fondly. "On a more serious note, I thought you would be busy with your cute fiancée. Why would you want me breathing down your necks?"

"What rubbish, *yaar*," exclaimed Sanjay. "I am so glad you could come."

Gautam beamed at his friend. "I would not miss this for anything. The end of your freedom. Now just put your feet up while I save my files."

"Dude, what's with the towel? Where are your clothes? I heard Sameera say something about this."

Gautam stiffened. "What did she say?"

“That she had asked you to change into something more appropriate for the engagement, but a *towel* was definitely not what she had in mind. Anyway, she’s pleasantly surprised by your *minimalistic* style. Your daring fashion sense has just earned you your first brownie points from her. Witty woman.”

The humor was lost on Gautam; he flushed a deep red.

“Don’t take it personally, dude.”

“What else did she say?”

“Nothing much. Just that a couple of kilos less would not be that bad on you, a more toned look, you see?” Sanjay smiled.

Gautam was livid. “This is being outright rude. She is arrogant, not witty.” He got up, agitated, trying to wrap up his work. “By the way, buddy, what if Tanya is just as high handed as Sameera? It may be late in the day but definitely not too late to avoid ending up as a hen-pecked husband.”

Sanjay guffawed. “Did she say anything nasty to you?”

“No, she didn’t say a word.”

“Then why are you so mad at her?”

“Because she irritates me.”

“Hmm. So Sameera already has our cool dude in knots. That’s one juicy story lurking around but I shall fish it out some other time. If I hang around here any longer, I just might be the first person I know to miss his own engagement. So button up and be downstairs by my side in ten minutes.”

Gautam wasn’t used to being the butt of sartorial jokes. Even in high school, he would be envied for his Nike sneakers and Benetton sweatshirts thanks to his NRI relatives. He always considered himself immaculately dressed, but his style was more conservative than flamboyant. He cursed himself for bringing his black Armani jacket instead of the more stylish Hugo Boss. He replaced the white shirt with a lavender one, and with some extra gel in his hair for a slicker look, a dab of cologne, and a firm resolve to steer clear of the infuriating girl, he was good to go.



THREE

The party was in full swing by the time he reached the main hall. The bar was crowded; he spotted Sanjay's father bellowing instructions to an Indianized Jeeves in a ridiculous black tailcoat. He went up to greet him and was engulfed in a big embrace.

"Gautam, my boy, I'm thrilled to see you here."

Gautam struggled to free himself from the bear hug.

"I keep hearing good things about you from Sanjay. Working very hard, I hear. That's good. Remember, *beta*, hard work is the key to success. Look at me. In my youth I used to work fourteen hours straight and see where I am now. Sanjay's mother wanted to meet you. Wait. Ah. There she is."

"Hello Aunty, how are you?"

Before Sanjay's mother could respond, Rohan erupted on the scene and pulled him away, "There you are. Just in time. Sanjay's been looking for you, *yaar*."

Relieved at escaping a second verbal barrage, Gautam turned towards the bar, "Let me quickly get a drink first; I'll join you in a minute." Standing at the bar, with a chilled beer in his hand, he looked around. The whole place, with its plush carpeting, elaborate chandeliers and imported flowers, looked immaculate; he felt genuinely happy for his friend. Gautam was determined to have a good time for his sake.

A booming voice drew his attention to the ceremony at hand. "Ladies and gentlemen, uncles and aunties, granddads and grandmoms, brothers and sisters, the grand moment we have been eagerly awaiting is finally here. Sanjay and Tanya are going to exchange rings either as a token of their commitment and undying love for each other or under extreme pressure from their families. The ring ceremony is about to begin." *Same old corny jokes*, thought Gautam as he made his way through the crowd and took his place near Sanjay's colossal throne. Tanya looked like an exquisite porcelain doll, a vision in soft pink and purple; hundreds of Swarovski crystals glittered on the veil and delicate silver embroidery and encrusted

stones adorned the outfit. Sanjay looked dashing in a deep navy blue suit.

But Gautam's eyes were riveted on Sameera and her understated look in a simple, silver-colored mermaid cut *lehenga* and corset blouse. Tall and radiant, she looked like a billion bucks. He quickly averted his gaze and tried to join in the playful banter around Sanjay as they exchanged rings.

Rituals done, it was time to gyrate; as the DJ swung into action, the air reverberated with the strains of *Desi Girl*. Sanjay's enthusiasm was infectious.

After a couple of chilled beers, Gautam too took to the dance floor with a vengeance but made sure to avoid 'snooty' Sameera. Somehow, the more he wanted to ignore her, the more he found himself seeking her out in the crowd. The fact that she seemed oblivious to his existence annoyed him. He could see her in the far corner, lip syncing and dancing among a gaggle of girls. Her sexy moves, Bollywood style *latkas* and *jhatkas* gave her an incredible sensual appeal, but the moment any boy tried to dance with her, she would freeze and excuse herself. Her friends seemed to form a protective circle around her.

Who the hell does she think she is? And why don't her loyal bodyguards drill some modesty into her instead of encouraging her? Do they think she's too good for all the boys here? His own friends drooled over her but she kept her distance; he was exasperated at the attention she was getting but he tried not to let it affect his evening. He was determined to have a good time and quit the floor only when Punjabi uncles started their gyrations on it, whiskey glasses balanced precariously on their heads.

The evening wore on. Gautam sat at the bar with Rohan and Mihir chatting about the events of the day.

Sameera and some other girls came their way and one of them asked, "Would you guys mind if we sit here?"

"It's a free country. I would not risk trying to tell a bunch of girls what they may or may not do." Gautam threw his customary caution to the winds.

"Sameera, the elusive 'poor guy' can also talk," said one of the girls.

"Sameera, you don't know what a *chupa rustam* our Gautam is," said Mihir. "Allow me to introduce you to the many wonders of our friend here. One look at him and you know he's a handsome dude. Speak to him for a minute and you will know how intelligent he is. He works harder and smarter than all of us put together. Always been a winner—first in class—teachers' favorite plus an artful debater, master at quizzing besides being

the fastest bowler, and the captain of the school cricket team. His best quality of course is the effect he has on pretty girls.”

“What a terrific story.” Sameera looked directly at him and continued, “If one were to believe them, you would be perfection personified, too good to be true.” Gautam was spellbound under her scrutiny. She turned towards his friends, “Rohan, Mihir are you guys sure he actually exists and is not some mystical creature?”

Gautam stared back at her, desperate to score a hit. “People should keep their prejudices to themselves rather than air them in public. Girls like you should know that.”

Surprised by Gautam’s vitriolic reply, Rohan and Mihir exchanged sly glances.

Sameera was unfazed. “You seem to have a PhD in ‘girls like me’. But then, by your age, you must have met so many girls. What am I, according to you? Do educate us.”

Sameera’s friends had never seen her engage in such verbal duels.

Gautam laughed. “Decoding you should be a no-brainer. Let me see. Judging by your attire, you have wealthy, indulgent parents. You have a job to earn pocket money, and more importantly, to lend an air of independence around you. Glamor attracts you and yes, you do seem to have a way with words. My guess is that you work in some creative firm like an advertising agency or an art gallery. And of course, deciding what to wear could be one of the most stressful activities in your life. Correct me if I am wrong.”

Sameera raised her hand to silence her friends; she held his gaze as she calmly replied, “Perfect score. You must be a face reader. If your investment banking fails, you could become a fortune teller at any railway station in Mumbai.”

She walked off with her entourage, leaving behind a confused, annoyed and visibly red-faced Gautam.

“What the hell was that?”

“You seem to have pressed the wrong buttons, *yaar*,” said Rohan.

“It’s a mistake to engage with this mad woman. She sure knows how to spoil my mood completely. Curse Sanjay for getting me into this mess. Come five-thirty tomorrow morning and I’ll be off to Mumbai, to my work, to my world.”

