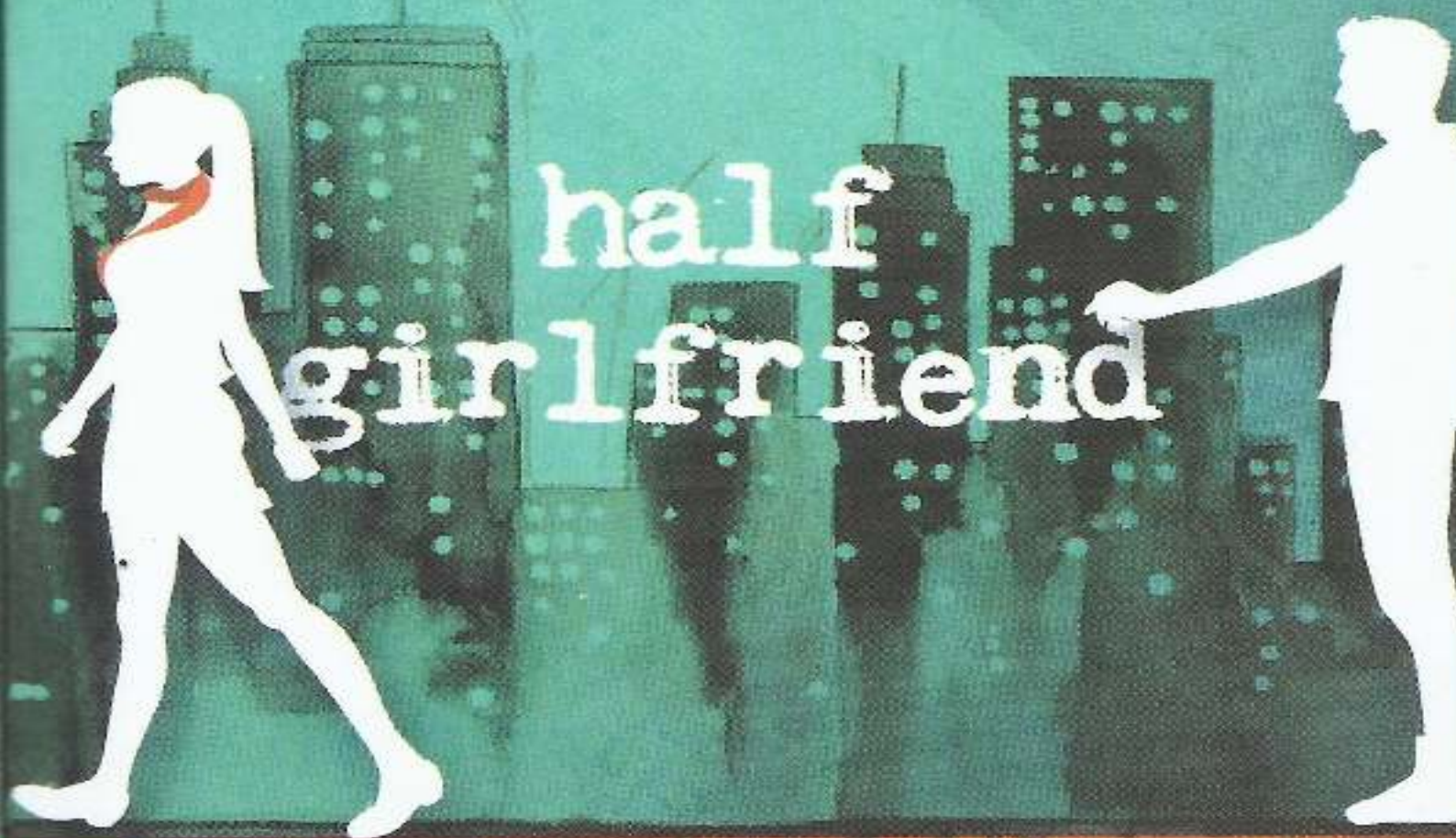


CHETAN BHAGAT

half girlfriend



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For my mother

For rural India

For the non-English types

Acknowledgements and some thoughts

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And, finally, Bill Gates—and not just for Microsoft Word this time.

I want to share something with you. With this book, I complete ten years as a writer. When I started writing, my motives were different. I wanted to make it. I wanted to prove a point. Today, I write for different reasons. I write for change. A change in the mindset of Indian society. It is a lofty goal, and I am not foolish enough to think I can ever achieve it. However, it helps to have positive intentions and a direction in life, and I am glad to have found mine.

I want to reach as many people as I can—through books, films or other mediums of entertainment, I am human; I will falter and I will have ups and downs. If possible, try to maintain your support and keep me grounded through that process,

One more thing; don't give me your admiration, Give me your love. Admiration passes, love endures. Also, admiration comes with expectations, Love accepts some flaws,

In fact, people sometimes ask me how I would like to be remembered. While hopefully that is a while away, all I tell them this: I don't want to be remembered, I just want to be missed. Welcome to *Half Girlfriend*.

Prologue

'They are your journals, you read them,' I said to him.

He shook his head.

'Listen, I don't have the time or patience for this,' I said, getting irritated. Being a writer on a book tour doesn't allow for much sleep—I had not slept more than four hours a night for a week. I checked my watch. 'It's midnight. I gave you my view. It's time for me to sleep now.'

'I want you to read them,' he said.

We were in my room at the Chanakya Hotel, Patna. This morning, he had tried to stop me on my way out. Then he had waited for me all day; I had returned late at night to find him sitting in the hotel lobby.

'Just give me five minutes, sir,' he had said, following me into the lift. And now here we were in my room as he pulled out three tattered notebooks from his backpack.

The spines of the notebooks came apart as he plonked them on the table. The yellowing pages fanned out between us. The pages had handwritten text, mostly illegible as the ink had smudged. Many pages had holes, rats having snacked on them.

An aspiring writer, I thought.

'If this is a manuscript, please submit it to a publisher. However, do not send it in this state,' he said.

'I am not a writer. This is not a book.'

'It's not?' I said, lightly touching a crumbling page. I looked up at him. Even seated, he was tall. Over six feet in height, he had a sunburnt, outdoor ruggedness about him. Black hair, black eyes and a particularly intense gaze. He wore a shirt two sizes too big for his lean frame. He had large hands. He reassembled the notebooks, gentle with his fingers, almost caressing the pages.

'What are these?' I said.

'I had a friend. These are her journals,' he said.

'Her journals. Ah. A girlfriend?'

'Half-girlfriend,'

'What?'

He shrugged.

'Listen, have you eaten anything all day?' I said.

He shook Iris head. I looked around. A bowl of fruit and some chocolates sat next to my bed. He took a piece of, dark chocolate when I offered it.

'So what do you want from me?' I said.

'I want you to read these journals, whatever is readable...because I can't.'

I looked at him, surprised.

'You can't read? As in, you can't read in general? Or you can't read these?'

'These.'

'Why not?' I said, reaching for a chocolate myself.

'Because Riya's dead.'

My hand froze in mid-air. You cannot pick up a chocolate when someone has just mentioned death.

'Did you just say the girl who wrote these journals is dead?'

He nodded. I took a few deep breaths and wondered what to say next.

'Why are they in such terrible shape?' I said after a pause.

'They are old. Her ex-landlord found them after years.'

'Sorry, Mr Whats-your-name. Can I order some food first?' I picked up the phone in the room and ordered two club sandwiches from the limited midnight menu.

'I'm Madhav. Madhav Jha. I live in Dumraon, eighty kilometres from here.'

'What do you do?'

'I run a school there.'

'Oh, that's...' I paused, searching for the right word.

'...noble? Not really. It's my mother's school.'

'I was going to say that's unusual. You speak English. Not typical of someone who runs a school in the back of beyond.'

'My English is still bad. I have a Bihari accent,' he said, without a trace of self-consciousness

'French people have a French accent when they speak English.'

'My English wasn't even English until...,' he trailed off and fell silent. I saw him swallow to keep his composure.

'Until?'

Pie absently stroked the notebooks on the desk.

'Nothing. Actually, I went to St. Stephen's.'

'In Delhi?'

'Yes. English types call it "Steven's".'

I smiled. 'And you are not one of the English types?'

'Not at all.'

The doorbell startled us. The waiter shifted the journals to put the sandwich tray on the table. A few sheets fell to the floor.

'Careful!' Madhav shouted, as if the waiter had broken some antique crystal.

The waiter apologized and scooted out of the room.

I offered Madhav the club sandwich, which had a tomato, cheese and lettuce filling. He ignored me and rearranged the loose sheets of paper.

'Are you okay? Please eat.'

He nodded, his eyes still on the pages of the journal. I decided to eat, since my imposed guest didn't seem to care for my hospitality.

'These journals obviously mean a lot to you. But why have you brought them here?'

'For you to read. Maybe they will be useful to you.'

'How will they be useful to me?' I said, my voice firmer with the food inside me. A part of me wanted him out of my room as soon as possible.

'She used to like your books. We used to read them together,' he said in a soft voice. 'For me to learn English.'

'Madhav,' I said, as calmly as possible, 'this seems like a sensitive matter. I don't want to get involved. Okay?'

His gaze remained directed at the floor. 'I don't want the journals either,' he said after a while.

'That is for you to decide.'

'It's too painful for me,' he said.

'I can imagine.'

He stood up, presumably to leave, He had not touched his sandwich—which was okay, because I could eat it after he left, •

'Thank you for your time. Sorry to have disturbed you.'

'It's okay,' I said.

He scribbled his phone number on a piece of paper and kept it on the table. 'If you are ever in Dumraon and need anything, let me know. It's unlikely you will ever come, but still...' He stood up, instantly dwarfing me, and walked to the door. *

'Madhav,' I called out after him, 'you forgot the journals. Please take them with you.'

'I told you I don't need them.'

'So why are you leaving them here?'

'Because I can't throw them away. You can.'

Before I could answer, he stepped out, shut the door and left. It took me a few seconds to realize what had happened.

I picked up the journals and ran out of the room, but the sole working lift had just gone down. I could have taken the stairs and caught him in time but, after a long day, I didn't have the energy to do that.

I came back to my room, irritated by his audacity. Dumping the notebooks and the slip with his phone number in the dustbin, I sat on the bed, a little unsettled,

I can't let someone I just met get the better of me, I thought, shaking my head. I switched off the lights and lay down. I had to catch an early-morning flight to Mumbai the next day and had a four-hour window of sleep. I couldn't wait to reach home.

However, I couldn't stop thinking about my encounter with the mysterious Madhav, Who was this guy? The words 'Dumraon', 'Stephen's' and 'Delhi' floated around in my head. Questions popped up: *What the hell is a half-girlfriend? And why do I have a dead girl's journals in my room?*

Eyes wide open, I lay in bed, staring at the little flashing red light from the smoke detector on the ceiling,

The journals bothered me. Sure, they lay in the dustbin. However, something about those torn pages, the dead person and her half-boyfriend, or whoever he was, intrigued me. *Don't go there,* I thought, but my mind screamed down its own suggestion: *Read just one page.*

'Don't even think about it,' I said out loud. But thirty minutes later, I switched on the lights in my room, fished out the journals from the dustbin and opened the first volume. Most pages were too damaged to read. I tried to make sense of what I could.

The first page dated back nine years to 1 November 2002. Riya had written about her fifteenth birthday. One mere page, I kept thinking. I flipped through the pages as I tried to find another readable one. I read one more section, and then another. Three hours later, I had read whatever could be read in the entire set.

The room phone rang at 5 a.m., startling me.

'Your wake-up call, sir,' the hotel operator said.

'I am awake, thank you,' I said, as I'd never slept at all. I called Jet Airways.

'I'd like to cancel a ticket on the Patna-Mumbai flight this morning.'

Pulling out the slip of paper with Madhav's number from the dustbin, I texted him: We need to talk. Important.

At 6.30 a.m., the tall, lanky man was in my room once more. 'Make tea for both of us. The kettle is above the minibar.'

He followed my instructions. The early morning sun highlighted his sharp features. He handed me a cup of tea and took a seat diagonally opposite me on the double bed.

'Should I speak first, or will you?' I said.

'About?'

'Riya.'

He sighed.

'Do you think you knew her well?'

'Yes,' he said.

'You feel comfortable talking about her to me?'

He thought for a few seconds and nodded.

'So tell me everything. Tell me the story of Madhav and Riya.'

'A story that fate left incomplete,' he said.

'Fate can be strange indeed.'

'Where do I start? When we first met?'

'Always a good place,' I said.

ACT I

Delhi

Where?’ I gasped, trying to catch my breath.

I had two minutes left for my interview to start and I couldn’t find the room. Lost, I stopped whoever I could in the confusing corridors of St. Stephens College to ask for directions.

Most students ignored me. Many sniggered. I wondered why. Well, now I know. My accent. Back in 2004, my English was Bihari. I don’t want to talk now like I did back then. It’s embarrassing. It wasn’t English. It was 90 per cent Bihari Hindi mixed with 10 per cent really bad English. For instance, this is what I had actually said: ‘Cumty room...bat!aieyega zara? Hamara interview hai na wahan... Mera khel ka kota hai. Kis taraf hai?’

If I start speaking the way I did in those days, you’ll get a headache. So I’m going to say everything in English, just imagine my words in Bhojpuri-laced Hindi, with the worst possible English thrown in.

‘Where you from, man?’ said a boy with hair longer than most girls.

‘Me Madhav Jha from Dumraon, Bihar.’

His friends laughed. Over time, I learnt that people often ask what they call a ‘rhetorical’ question—something they ask just to make a point, not expecting an answer. Here, the point was to demonstrate that I was an alien amongst them.

‘What are you interviewing for? Peon?’ the long-haired boy said and laughed.

I didn’t know enough English back then to be offended. Also, I was in a hurry. ‘You know where it is?’ I said instead, looking at his group of friends. They all seemed to be the rich, English types. Another boy, short and fat, seemed to take pity on me and replied, ‘Take a left at the corner of the main red building and you’ll find a sign for the committee room.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. This I knew how to say in English.

‘Can you read the sign in English?’ the boy with the long hair said. His friends told him to leave me alone. I followed the fat boy’s instructions and ran towards the red building.

I faced the first interview of my life. Three old men sat in front of me. They looked like they had not smiled since their hair had turned grey.

I had learnt about wishing people before an interview. I had even practised it. ‘Good morning sir.’

‘There are a few of us here,’ said the man in the middle. He seemed to be around fifty-five years old and wore square, black-rimmed glasses and a checked jacket.

‘Good morning, sir, sir and sir,’ I said.

They smiled. I didn't think it was a good smile. It was the high-class-to-low-class smile. The smile of superiority, the smile of delight that they knew English and I didn't.

Of course, I had no choice but to smile back.

The man in the middle was Professor Pereira, the head of sociology, the course I had applied for. Professor Fernandez, who taught physics, and Professor Gupta, whose subject was English, sat on his left and right respectively.

'Sports quota, eh?' Prof. Pereira said. 'Why isn't Yadav here?'

'I'm here, sir,' a voice called out from behind me. I turned around to see a man in a tracksuit standing at the door. He looked too old to be a student but too young to be faculty.

'This one is 85 per cent your decision,' Prof. Pereira said.

'No way, sir. You are the final authority.' He sat down next to the professors. Piyush Yadav was the sports coach for the college and sat in on all sports-quota interviews. He seemed simpler and friendlier than the professors. He didn't have a fancy accent either.

'Basketball?' Prof. Fernandez asked, scanning through my file.

'Yes, sir,' I said.

'What level?'

'State.'

'Do you speak in full sentences?' Prof. Gupta said in a firm voice.

I didn't fully understand his question. I kept quiet.

'Do you?' he asked again.

'Yes, yes,' I said, my voice like a convict's.

'So...why do you want to study at St. Stephen's?'

A few seconds of silence followed. The four men in the room looked at me. The professor had asked me a standard question.

'I want good college,' I said, after constructing the sentence in my head.

Prof. Gupta smirked. 'That is some response. And why is St. Stephen's a good college?'

I switched to Hindi. Answering in English would require pauses and make me come across as stupid. Maybe I was stupid, but I did not want them to know that.

'Your college has a big name. It is famous in Bihar also,' I said.

'Can you please answer in English?' Prof. Gupta said.

'Why? You don't know Hindi?' I said in reflex, and in Hindi.

I saw my blunder in their horrified faces. I had not said it in defiance; I really wanted to know why they had to interview me in English when I was more comfortable in Hindi. Of course, I didn't know then that Stephen's professors didn't like being asked to speak in Hindi.

'Professor Pereira, how did this candidate get an interview?'' Prof. Gupta said.

Prof. Pereira seemed to be the kindest of the lot. He turned to me. 'We prefer English as the medium of instruction in our college, that's all.'

Without English, I felt naked. I started thinking about my return trip to Bihar. I didn't belong here—these English-speaking monsters would eat me alive. I was wondering what would be the best way to take their leave when Piyush Yadav broke my chain of thought.

'Bihar se ho? Are you from Bihar?' he said.

The few words in Hindi felt like cold drops of rain on a scorching summer's day. I loved Piyush Yadav in that instant.

'Yes, sir. Dumraon.'

'I know. Three hours from Patna, right?' he said.

'You know Dumraon?' I said. I could have kissed his feet. The three English-speaking monsters continued to stare.

'I'm from Patna. Anyway, tell them about your achievements in basketball,' Piyush said.

I nodded. He sensed my nervousness and spoke again. 'Take your time. I am Hindi-medium, too. I know the feeling.'

The three professors looked at Piyush as if wondering how he had ever managed to get a job at the college.

I composed myself and spoke my rehearsed lines.

'Sir, I have played state-level basketball for six years. Last year, I was in the waiting list for the BFI national team.'

'BFI?' said Prof. Gupta.

'Basketball Federation of India,' Piyush answered for me, even though I knew the answer.

'And you want to do sociology. Why?' Prof. Fernandez said.

'It's an easy course, No need to study. Is that it?' Prof. Gupta remarked.

I didn't, know whether Gupta had something against me, was generally grumpy or suffered from constipation.

'I am from rural area.'

'I am from a rural area,' Gupta said, emphasizing the 'a' as if omitting it was a criminal offence.

'Hindi, sir? Can I explain in Hindi?'

Nobody answered. I had little choice. I took my chances and responded in my language. 'My mother runs a school and works with the villagers. I wanted to learn more about our society. Why are our villages so backward? Why do we have so many differences based on caste and religion? I thought I could find some answers in this course.'

Prof. Gupta understood me perfectly well. However, he was what English-speaking people would call an 'uptight prick'. He asked Piyush to translate what I had said.

'That's a good reason,' Prof. Pereira said once Piyush was done. 'But now you are in Delhi. If you pass out of Stephen's, you will get jobs in big companies. Will you go back to your native place?' His concern seemed genuine.

It took me a few seconds to understand his question. Piyush offered to translate but I gestured for him not to.

'I will, sir,' I finally replied. I didn't give a reason. I didn't feel the need to tell them I would go back because my mother was alone there. I didn't say we were from the royal family of Durnraon. Even though there was nothing royal about us any more, we belonged there. And, of course, I didn't mention the fact that I couldn't stand any of the people I had met in this city so far.

'We'll ask you something about Bihar then?' Prof. Fernandez said. 'Sure.'

'What's the population of Bihar?'

'Ten crores.'

'Who runs the government in Bihar?'

'Right now it's Lalu Prasad's party.'

'And which party is that?'

'RJD - Rashtriya Janata Dal.'

The questions kept coming, and after a while I couldn't keep track of who was asking what. While I understood their English, I couldn't answer in complete sentences. Hence, I gave the shortest answers possible. But one question had me stumped.

'Why is Bihar so backward?' Prof Gupta said.

I didn't know the answer, forget saying it in English. Piyush tried to speak on my behalf. 'Sir, that's a question nobody can really answer.' But Prof. Gupta raised a hand. 'You said your mother runs a rural school. You should know Bihar.'

I kept quiet.

'It's okay. Answer in Hindi,' Prof. Pereira said.

'Backward compared to what, sir?' I said in Hindi, looking at Prof. Gupta.

'Compared to the rest of India.'

'India is pretty backward,' I said. 'One of the poorest nations in the world.'

'Sure. But why is Bihar the poorest of the poor?'

'Bad government,' Piyush said, almost as a reflex. Prof. Gupta kept his eyes on me.

'It's mostly rural, sir,' I said. 'People don't have any exposure to modernity and hold on to backward values. There's poor education. Nobody invests in my state. The government is in bed with criminals and together they exploit the state and its people.'

Prof Pereira translated my answer for Prof. Gupta. He nodded as he heard it. 'Your answers are sensible, but your English is terrible,' he said.

'Would you rather take a sensible student, or someone who speaks a foreign language well?'

My defiance stumped them all. Prof. Fernandez wiped his glasses as he spoke, turning his head towards me. 'English is no longer a foreign language, Mr Jha. It's a global language. I suggest you learn it.' 'That's why I'm here, sir,' I said.

My answers came from the heart but I didn't know if they had any effect on the professors. The interview was over. They asked me to leave the room.

*

I stood in the corridor, figuring out where to go next. Piyush came out of the committee room. His lean and fit frame made him look like a student, despite him being much older. He spoke to me in Hindi. 'Your sports trial is in one hour. See me on the basketball court.' 'Sir, is there even a point? That interview went horribly.'

'You couldn't learn some English, along with basketball?' 'Nobody speaks it in our area.' I

paused and added, 'Sir.'

He patted my back. 'Get out of Bihar mode, son. Anyway, sports quota trials are worth 85 per cent. Play well.'

'I'll do my best, sir.'

If she weren't tall I wouldn't have noticed her. It is funny how her height shaped my life.

If she had been four inches shorter, my eyes may never have met hers and everything would have been different. If I had not been bored and arrived at the basketball court an hour earlier, it would have been different. If someone had not missed a pass and the ball had not come out of the court and hit me on the head, I would have had a different life. Tiny bumps in time shape our lives, even though we spend hours trying to make long-term plans. I had no plan to meet the love of my life on a basketball court. I was there only to kill time and because I had nowhere else to go.

A small crowd of students, mostly men, had gathered around the Stephen's basketball court. Girls' sports trials always garnered an audience—there was no better excuse to check them out. Everyone spoke in English. I didn't speak at all. I straightened my back and stared at the court with a sense of purpose, mainly to come across as if I belonged there. As ten girls came on to the court, the crowd cheered. Five of the girls belonged to the existing college team; the other five had applied for admission under the sports quota.

Piyush came to the centre of the court, ball in hand and whistle in mouth. As he blew it, the girls sprang into action.

Five feet, nine inches is tall for an Indian girl. It is tall even for a girl in a basketball team. Her long neck, long arms and long legs held every guy's attention. She was a part of the sports-quota applicants' team. She wore black fitted shorts and a sleeveless sports vest with 'R' printed in yellow at the back. She collected the ball within seconds. She wore expensive Nike ankle-length sneakers, the kind I had seen NBA players wear on TV. Her diamond earrings twinkled in the sun. She dribbled the ball with her right hand. I noticed she had long, beautiful fingers.

'Ten points for looks, coach,' a senior student called out as R passed the ball. The crowd tittered. Well, the men did. The wisecrack distracted R for a moment, but she resumed her game as if she was used to such comments.

The sports-quota girls played well individually. However, they didn't play well as a team.

R dribbled the ball and reached the opposition's basket. Three opponents surrounded her. R passed the ball to her teammate, who missed the pass.

'What the...' R screamed. Too late. The rival team took the ball, passed it to the other end and scored a basket.

R cursed herself, inaudible to anyone else. She then signalled to three of her teammates to cover specific opponents and jogged across the court. When she went past me, I saw her sweaty, flushed face from up close. We made eye contact for nanoseconds, perhaps only in my imagination. But in those nanoseconds something happened to my heart.

No, I wouldn't say I fell in love with her. I wouldn't even say I felt attracted to her. But I felt something deep inside, strong enough for my heart to say, *You have to talk to this girl at least once in your life.*

'Babes, cover her. I said cover' R screamed. Her state of mind was as far from mine as possible. She passed the ball to her teammate, who missed scoring a basket again.

'What are you guys doing?' she shouted in perfect English. I felt nervous; how would I ever speak to her? Her face was grimy, dust sticking to her left cheek and forehead. Yet, it was one of the most beautiful faces I had seen in my entire life. Sometimes it is hard to explain why you find a person beautiful. Was it her narrow face, perfectly in line with her slender body? Was it her flawless skin and complexion, which had turned from cream to pink to red? Or was it not about her looks at all? Was it her passion, her being totally immersed in the game? I didn't know.

Of course, I never actually thought it would lead to anything. She seemed too posh to even give me a second glance.

Destiny, however, had other plans. For why else, in the seventh minute of the first half, would the college team captain overthrow the ball outside the court, where it hit my head as I stood on the sidelines? Why would I grab the ball in reflex? More than anything, why would R come to collect it?

'Ball, please,' she said, panting. I felt paralysed.

'I said ball, please,' she said. I held on to the ball for an extra half second. I wanted to look at her a bit longer. I wanted to take a snapshot of her sweaty face and store it in my mind's camera for life.

I threw the ball at her. She caught it with ease and looked at me. She could tell from my throw that I knew the game.

'Change your point shooter,' I said. For some reason, I had managed to speak in correct English this time.

'What?' she said. She surveyed me from top to bottom. I now wished I had worn better clothes. I had not changed out of my interview shirt and pants, both of which the tailor back home had stitched too loose for me. I looked out of place on the basketball court. With my folder of certificates, I resembled a hero from those Hindi films of the seventies—the one who could not find a job. *I have a Bihar state team T-shirt*, I wanted to tell her. Of course, in the middle of a game, and as a first conversation, this was a terrible idea.

'Your shooter is useless,' I said.

The referee whistled to commence the game. She turned away and forgot about me faster than her throw reached her team member. 'Here, pass it to me,' R shouted as she reached the opposition basket.

Her point shooter held the ball and looked around, confused.

'I said *here*' R screamed so loudly that pigeons flew off the trees in the lawns. The point shooter passed the ball, R caught it and took a shot from well beyond the three-point line.

Whoosh! 'The ball went through the basket. The crowd cheered. They already had a soft spot for R anyway.

The referee announced a break at the ten-minute mark. The college team led 12-5. R huddled with her team, figuring out their strategy for the next half. As her team meeting ended, she wiped her face and neck with a towel.

I couldn't take my eyes off her. I forgot I had my own trial in less than an hour. I only wanted to figure out a way to talk to her a bit more. Maybe I could tell her she played well. I wondered how to tell her about my state-level game without coming across as a show-off. And, more than anything, how would I go beyond five words of English?

She caught me staring. I wanted to kill myself. She continued to jgnli directly at me, the towel still around her neck. Then she walked up to me. A shiver ran down my spine.

I didn't mean to stare, I wanted to tell her. I wondered if she would scream at me like she had done during the match.

Flunks,' R said.

She had walked across the court, to thank me?

She was breathing hard. My eyes were glued to hers.

Look away, Madhav, I scolded myself and turned away.

'That was a good tip,' she said to my left profile.

'Welcome... You...are...good,' I said. Uttering each word was like hitting a brick.

'Any other suggestions for the second half? We're losing.'

Yes,' I said, turning to face her again. I wanted to give her more up but couldn't in English. 'You speak Hindi?' I said.

She looked baffled. Nobody in St. Stephen's had ever asked anyone that question.

'Well, yeah, of course,' she said.

'Okay,' I said, and explained in my language, 'they have two strong players. Cover them tight. Don't fix formations for your players. Two of yours should move with them. You become the shooter. Of the other two, one is your defence, the other supports you.'

The whistle blew again.

‘Got to go,’ she said. ‘Catch you later.’

I didn’t understand what ‘catch you’ meant. Did it mean she would catch what I had said later? Did it mean she didn’t understand what I had said? Or did she mean she actually wanted to catch me? Like, she liked me so much she wanted to catch me? Of course, this seemed unlikely. But then I had given her good tips and you never know with these modern people. You see, my mind has this overdrive switch, especially when it’s excited. It starts to get ahead of itself and thinks useless thoughts when I could actually be doing something constructive, like watching the game or finding out that girl’s name.

The game restarted. The referee’s whistle, the sound of the players’ shoes as they run across the court, the shrieks, the yells and the cries of victory and defeat—few things in life match the excitement of a sports court. Basketball, underrated as it might be in this country, packs all in half an hour. I cannot understand why Indians don’t play this game more. It doesn’t take up too much space, doesn’t need much equipment and a big group can play it all at once.

‘Yes!’ she screamed as she scored a basket. The hall went in without touching the ring, making the most beautiful sound in a basketball game—the soft ‘chhciaak’ when only the net touches the ball. Sweat dripped off her face as she ran back to her side of the court.

The match ended 21-15. The newbies had lost, but still kept pace with the college team—a considerable achievement. R, however, seemed disappointed. She wiped her face with a towel and picked up her blue Nike kitbag. A few boys tried to make eye contact with her but she ignored them, I wanted to speak to her. However, no boy from Dumraon has ever had the guts to approach a high-class girl from Delhi. I wanted her to watch my game. There was nothing else I could impress her with. Coach Piyush went up to her. They became engrossed in a conversation. This was my chance. Underconfident guys need a go-between to speak to a girl. I ran up to Piyush.

‘My trial now. I change, sir?’ I said to him.

Piyush turned to me, surprised, I don’t know whether at my English or my stupid question or both.

‘Aise kheliyega? Trial-va hai ya mazaak?’ he said in Bhojpuri, not even Hindi. He meant: will you play like this? Is it a trial or a joke?

I regretted knowing him.

‘I...I...’

Then R interrupted. ‘Oh, you are also sports quota?’

Piyush looked at both of us, surprised at the familiarity.

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