

Their Wonder Years: Fall 98

- Chapter 1: The Departure

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[1,814 words]

August 1998 – Chennai International Airport

The blast of cool, processed air hit Bharath's face as he stepped onto the jet bridge. It felt like he had already left India behind. His sneakers squeaked a little on the polished floor, his shoulder bag was a bit heavier than it should have been - stuffed with snacks from Amma and a last-minute gift from his cousin: a deodorant called *Wild Stone*. He had emptied half of it onto himself in the airport bathroom.

"Makes you irresistible to women macha," his cousin swore. "You'll be fighting them off with a stick."

He was going to the US. The land of Pamela Anderson of Baywatch and Denise Richards of Wild Things!

Well, first to Dubai. Then to Atlanta. But still. He was *on his way*. The butterflies in his stomach weren't fear - no way - this was *excitement*. He tried to walk like he'd done this a hundred times, casually glancing at the overhead compartments, nodding at strangers like a seasoned traveler. Like someone who belonged.

When he spotted the Emirates air stewardesses, his heart actually skipped a beat. Tall. Graceful. Impossibly poised in their deep red hats and flowing beige scarves. One of them gave him a polite smile as he passed, and he swore it lingered for an extra half-second. That was it. This was *exactly* like that movie he and his friends had watched at the shady theater in Royapettah. The one where the handsome guy flies first class, gets invited to a hidden bedroom in the plane, and somehow ends up making love to multiple air hostesses somewhere between Mumbai and Frankfurt. Somehow their lack of service to their customers never bothered anyone.

His friend Mukund had leaned over halfway through the movie and whispered, "*This is real, da. This is basically a documentary.*"

Bharath had believed him. With all that Wildstone on as insurance - he had no reason to doubt the inevitable. It was all just a function of time before he was bedding someone.

He wasn't sure about taking on multiple women - but he was sure he could handle at least one. Maybe the air hostess that he could swear had eyed him and licked her lips as he passed by. Just like the ad for Wild Stone.

He scanned the cabin discreetly - no sign of a hidden bedroom yet, but this was just the first leg. Maybe the bigger plane from Dubai had the special bedroom. If he remembered right, the sex in the movie did start only when the plane was over Europe. Maybe it was something in the ozone layer that made women lower their inhibitions.

He ran a hand through his hair, double-checked his parting, and adjusted his blue-tinted sunglasses on his forehead. They didn't serve any real function indoors, but they *looked* good.

He stashed his backpack in the overhead bin and sank into his economy seat with what he imagined was the grace of a panther. Row 34C. Almost his favourite size on women as well. He did prefer the Ds, but C was acceptable. Regardless, aisle seat. Perfect for gazing around the cabin as his cologne announced him to the world.

As he buckled in, he let himself grin. He was *the* Bharath - computer science prodigy, unofficial cricket captain of his colony's team, two-time inter school quiz champion, and according to his mother and three aunts, "the best boy in all of Tamil Nadu." Sure, he'd never had a girlfriend - but not for lack of offers. Just... bad timing he supposed. Girls liked him. Apparently, he had a private fan club that had never announced itself. Everyone said so.

At customs, even the officer had been impressed. "*US-aa? For studies? Computer science? Ah, super, super.*" His mom had nearly cried. His dad wasn't so pleased.

"US? For what? I am building a damn IT empire here and it's not for the neighbours' children. What will you get there that you won't get here?"

Bharath had smiled then, respectful, even as his stomach twisted. He didn't have the heart to tell his father the truth - that it wasn't just about the degree. It wasn't even about the prestige of studying abroad.

It was about escape.

He stared out the window now, watching as the engines roared to life and the baggage handlers threw their luggage onto the belt that led into the aircraft.

He loved Chennai. He really did. It had given him everything - a supportive family, recognition, comfort, a future. But it had also boxed him in with those very same things. Expectations. Eyes everywhere. Aunties who asked too many questions. Friends who only saw one version of him. Teachers who had decided what kind of man he would become before he even got the chance to find out for himself.

He wasn't running away from home. He was running *towards* something.

A blank slate. A place where he wasn't "Mr. Computer Science." Or "that Murali sir's son." Or "the boy who topped state maths." A place where no one would whisper about who saw him with which girl on Anna Salai, or raise eyebrows because he was with the wrong crowd. A place where he could fail, or flirt, or fall - and no one would write it into his permanent character record.

Maybe it was naive. Maybe the US wouldn't be what he thought it was. But the truth was, he needed to try. He needed to *breathe*.

There were parts of himself he hadn't even met yet. He wasn't going to find them while trapped in the role of "good boy."

His full scholarship had made it impossible for his father to say no.

"All right," Appa had finally said. "Go there. And come back fast."

But Bharath knew he wasn't going to come back the same.

The last few passengers were still trickling in when it happened.

A soft whiff of something floral and faintly citrusy floated past his nose.

He turned slightly - and saw her.

She was walking slowly up the aisle, scanning seat numbers with the kind of effortless grace that could make a Bollywood director weep. Slim jeans. Lavender kurta top. A loose bun of silky black hair that looked like it had been twisted up in a hurry but still managed to look like it belonged on the cover of *Femina*. A dusty-blue Jansport slung over one shoulder. A Sony Walkman clipped casually to her waistband like it had been born there.

Bharath froze.

Abort eye contact. Retreat, retreat!

He snapped his head toward the window, suddenly fascinated by the infinite magic of the tarmac.

Don't look. Don't be obvious. Act natural. What does natural look like? Am I breathing weird? Why are my hands sweaty? I haven't even done anything yet.

Inside, his brain was spiraling into a desperate backroom negotiation with the universe.

Please. Please let it be 34B. Just this once. I'll start going to the temple regularly. I'll stop skipping shlokas during sandhyavandanam prayers. I'll even apologize to that dog I accidentally kicked when I was seven. Just... please, let this angel descend into the seat beside me.

He casually adjusted his collar, then realized it was a T-shirt. He had no collar. No problem. He pushed his sunglasses slightly higher up on his head - no sun inside the plane, but surely it added mystery. Then, leaning back in what he imagined was his best "brooding intellectual" posture, he turned his head *just enough* to track her progress with his peripheral vision.

She was slowing down. She was checking row numbers. This could be it. This could be his boy-meets-girl moment. The one they would talk about fondly in future dinners with friends and relatives as they held hands.

She slowed near his row. His pulse quickened. He clenched and unclenched his hands beneath the tray table. She was close. So close now.

She paused.

His breath hitched. His heart held a pose like a Bharatanatyam dancer mid-step.

And then... she turned casually into Row 31 without so much as a sideways glance and disappeared behind a curtain of other heads.

Bharath sagged into his seat like a punctured balloon. So much for fate. So much for cosmic signs. He sighed. Then he built his hopes up again. Surely he had seen another good looking girl before he had boarded the plane. He still had his chances to charm a beautiful lady. And after all there were still the stewardesses on the plane. He couldn't explore the skies the way they were meant to be if he had a girl next to him. Just when his spirits had lifted sufficiently someone shuffled next to him.

"Excuse me, thambi?"

The voice was warm, slightly nasal, and came with the distinct scent of coconut oil and mothballs. Bharath turned to find a sweet-looking older woman in a maroon sari smiling down at him, clutching a handbag that looked like it might contain exactly three hundred peppermints and a live pressure cooker.

Her husband was already peering suspiciously at the overhead bin like it owed him money.

"Is this 34A and 34B?" she asked, already nudging past him.

"Yes, aunty," Bharath said, standing up as gallantly as the cramped aisle would allow.

The old man grunted and squeezed into 34A with the grace of a sandbag being loaded onto a truck. Bharath moved aside to let the woman into the middle seat. She settled in with a satisfied sigh, patting her bun into submission and giving Bharath a kindly smile that radiated pure, unsolicited moral judgment.

“First time abroad?”

He nodded. “Yes, aunty.”

“Ah, I could tell,” she said, patting his arm. “Don’t worry, you’ll be fine. You have such a good face. Honest face.”

He gave her a polite smile and leaned toward the window again, this time with a touch more resignation than anticipation. So much for the sky-bedroom fantasy.

In the row ahead, he caught a glimpse of the girl’s bun bobbing slightly to music. The headphones had gone on. She was gone to the world now.

Just as the last of the cabin bags were tucked away and the safety demo began, the old couple beside him pulled out tiffin boxes wrapped in layers of foil and cling film. The unmistakable scent of lemon rice, pickle, and fried appalam wafted into the air.

“Sir. You are not allowed to pull out the tray tables before liftoff sir.” said one of those elegant stewardesses to the uncle.

He huffed as he put the food away and stowed the tables back.

The old man looked at Bharath sideways and grunted. “Plane food is rubbish. I am a diabetic you know.”

His wife smiled. “Have a murukku?” she offered, holding out a tissue with two perfectly spiral pieces.

Bharath took one, unsure whether to laugh or sigh. The murukku was delicious.

Well, he thought as the plane began to taxi and the engines roared to life, *this is just the first leg*.

The runway blurred outside. The wings tilted upward.

As the wheels lifted off the ground, so did he.

Into the clouds. Into his new life.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 2: First Flight Blues

[1,866 words]

The flight had been... fine.

Actually, good, technically. It was smooth. The takeoff was uneventful. The crew was efficient. The food, surprisingly edible. But still, somewhere deep inside him, Bharath felt an unfamiliar tightness - like he was already being let down by a dream.

He had imagined this flight for months.

The moment he'd gotten his visa stamped, he had spent a week replaying every international-flight scene from every Hollywood movie he could remember. Rich leather seats, flirtatious stewardesses, champagne flutes. One of his friends had even said, "Bro, on Emirates? You're basically royalty in the sky."

And here he was, in row 34, jammed next to a talkative old lady and a deeply opinionated uncle, neither of whom showed the slightest interest in giving him five minutes of peace. Not that they weren't nice. The aunty beside him had smiled at him warmly from the moment she sat down, and hadn't stopped smiling - or talking - since.

"You know, when my nephew went to America, he cried every day for two weeks. Such a soft boy. That's why I told his mother: no need to send. But she didn't listen."

"Uh-huh," Bharath nodded, attempting a smile that looked attentive but was secretly trying to calculate if he could plug in his headphones without looking rude.

"And you're going for computers, no? My niece also is in software. She works in Phoenix. Very big company. They make... something to do with accounting, I think. Always flying around."

"That's great, aunty"

A moment of silence. He reached for the headphones in the seat pocket, but -

"Do you eat meat?"

Bharath froze. "Uh, no. I mean... maybe? I don't know yet..."

"Hmph," the uncle grunted from the aisle seat, finally joining the conversation. "Don't. They put all sorts of hormones in it. That's why the Americans are like that - big but no

stamina. You see, Indians have ancient digestion systems. We are made for ghee, not meat.”

“Right,” Bharath said, forcing a chuckle. “That makes sense.”

He stared longingly at the small screen on the seat-back in front of him. The Emirates entertainment system was slick - movies, TV shows, music, even games. For a brief, glorious moment before takeoff, he'd spotted an episode of FRIENDS listed under comedy.

He had watched a lot of English TV back home - on Star TV, but his friend Sathya insisted that he keep up with the latest in American pop culture and had loaned him pirated VCDs of Seasons 1 to 4 of Friends. He'd fallen in love instantly. Monica, Chandler, the Central Perk sofa - all of it. Watching FRIENDS while flying to America? That was poetic. Symbolic, even. They made girlfriends so easily on that show. Even nerdy Ross. He wondered what his first girlfriend was going to look like?

But now he didn't dare select it. What if aunty looked over and asked, “What is this? Why are they living together without marriage?” What if there was a kissing scene? Or worse - one of those episodes?

He swallowed and scrolled cautiously through the options. Documentaries. Nature shows. Something safe.

Meanwhile, aunty was back at it.

“My niece told me, in America, you have to cook your own food every day. Can you believe it? In this cold also! I told her to just marry someone and settle down, but these modern girls... what to do? Even worse, you don't even have water to wash yourself after you go potty. They use paper it seems!”

“It's all a CIA conspiracy I tell you.” nodded uncle sagely as he seemed to be having a parallel conversation with Bharath without him knowing about it.

Bharath nodded politely, wondering how to steer the conversation without being rude. He couldn't just shut it down. What if she complained about him to Amma through some extended-family grapevine? What if she turned out to be related to someone who knew someone in Atlanta?

And then, to make things worse - he glanced ahead.

Row 31. That girl. The one with the lavender kurti.

She had headphones in earlier, but now she had taken them off. She was talking to someone. Some guy - short hair, glasses, and annoyingly confident body language. They were laughing, leaning slightly toward each other.

Lucky SOB.

Bharath didn't even know who the guy was, but he hated him already. They were sharing a pack of Mentos. She was animated, expressive, brushing her hair behind her ear when she smiled. The kind of smile that wasn't polite - it was real.

He glanced down at his armrest. The uncle's elbow had somehow crept over the shared boundary around aunty and was now fully claiming territory. Aunty, meanwhile, was adjusting her footrest and had managed to kick Bharath twice by accident.

He was cramped, slightly sweaty despite the air-conditioning, and smelled wildly of Wild Stone, lemon rice, and betrayal. The cologne was making him choke now. He wasn't sure the advertisers were very honest with how it made women feel. Maybe he hadn't used it right.

"Where in America are you going?" aunty asked again, for the third time.

"Atlanta, aunty."

"Oh! That's a southern place, no? My husband's cousin's daughter lives in... California? Very close only."

Bharath was about to correct her geography but stopped himself. What was the point? He was going to be in Atlanta. Alone. Surrounded by strangers. Cooking his own food. Avoiding meat. And apparently never watching FRIENDS again.

He leaned back, closed his eyes for a second. The low hum of the engine filled his ears.

When he opened them again, the cabin lights had dimmed slightly. The stewardesses had just passed by with coffee. He had smiled at the one nearest to him - a beautiful woman with a sharp jawline and perfect makeup - and she had smiled back, professionally. Efficient. Warm, but not interested.

No flirtation. No lingering looks. No "Excuse me sir, would you like to see our sky bed?" Nothing. Nobody even came and knocked into him by mistake giving him a coy smile asking if they could do anything to say they were sorry. Real life documentary it seems. He would take care of Mukund later.

By the time he could think of something to charm the panties off the stewardess she was already two rows ahead, asking someone if they wanted milk with their tea.

This is not how the movie went.

He sighed.

The old uncle had now pulled out a Tamil newspaper from his bag and was reading it out loud, pointing to the headlines and explaining his opinions.

“Look at this. Government wasting money on cricket. All these ODI-type games are spoiling our youth. No one studies properly. Everyone wants to hit a sixer.”

Bharath gave a weak smile.

But he said nothing.

He took a sip of the water bottle handed to him earlier, now lukewarm. The plane shuddered slightly - just turbulence - but aunty clutched her seat and gasped.

“Oh my God! Is it normal?”

“Yes, aunty,” Bharath assured her gently. “Just clouds. Happens all the time.”

“You've done this before?”

“Uhhh... yes. But this is the first time I've experienced turbulence. But I read about. Nothing will happen. Don't worry”

Aunty clutched his arm like he was a seasoned pilot, reassured that his knowledge about turbulence would save her.

Bharath gave up. No FRIENDS. No sex on a sky bed. No conversations with pretty girls. Just lemon rice, unsolicited wisdom, and emergency arm-grabbing.

He glanced at the small flight tracker screen.

1 hour 7 minutes to Dubai.

Almost there.

Just one more hour of being polite, adjusting elbow space, answering questions about whether he ate meat, and resisting the urge to scream into the cushion. This is still just the beginning, he reminded himself. This is the sacrifice before the glory. This is the montage scene. Every hero suffers a little before greatness.

He looked once more toward Row 31. The girl was leaning back now, eyes closed, her head tilted slightly toward the window. The other guy was watching a movie on his own screen.

Maybe they weren't that close. Maybe on the next flight, she'd notice him. He smiled at that thought. Clung to it like a life raft.

One more hour.

“Careful, aunty,” Bharath said, reaching for aunty’s oversized handbag before it could knock into the narrow aisle wall.

“Such a sweet boy,” she cooed, readjusting the end of her sari as she navigated the final few feet to the jet bridge. “May you get a nice girl and settle down quickly.”

“An Indian girl only,” the uncle muttered behind her. “Those foreign girls won’t do cooking. All fridge food.”

Bharath smiled politely, for the thirty-ninth time since boarding in Chennai.

He hadn’t slept a wink. Between aunty’s stories about her son-in-law’s cholesterol levels and uncle’s late-night monologue about the dangers of genetically modified corn, Bharath had only managed short bursts of shut-eye - the kind that ends with your neck cricked sideways and mouth slightly open.

Still, as they disembarked into the bright, air-conditioned glass corridors of **Dubai International**, he felt a rush of renewed energy. This wasn’t India anymore. This was the glittering halfway point. The stepping stone to America.

The airport was massive. Every surface sparkled - floors, columns, even the decorative water features. People moved briskly in all directions, trolleys loaded with designer bags, duty-free purchases, babies in strollers, the occasional person in a suit looking like they had just stepped out of a stock photo.

And the women. Bharath blinked. *My God.*

Tall women in heels and tailored coats. Arab women in flowing abayas with smoky eyes and red lipstick. European women with legs that didn’t seem to end and cheekbones you could cut glass on. American tourists in athleisure. Indian air hostesses. Filipino ground staff. Japanese stewardesses in silk uniforms. It was like a United Nations modeling pageant.

He adjusted his bag, stood up straighter, and walked a little slower through the terminal.

If I were James Bond, I would have already charmed at least three of them by now. At least one would’ve asked me to stay in Dubai for the night. Probably the tall Russian-looking one near Gate C18. She looks like she likes tech guys.

But he didn’t stop. He had a connecting flight to catch. And so did aunty and uncle, who were now looking hopelessly at the flight display screens.

“Thambi,” another aunty said, holding her boarding pass up like a sacred document, “do you know which terminal is for London?”

Bharath took it from her and squinted at the gate number. He checked the nearest display, compared it to the signs, and started gently herding them toward the escalator.

“Come with me. It’s that way.”

They followed like trusting grandparents, uncle still grumbling that Dubai airport was unnecessarily big. “Chennai airport is enough for me,” he sniffed.

Twenty minutes later, after guiding them to their new gate, helping them find seats, and even explaining how to use the water fountain without pressing random buttons, Bharath finally waved goodbye.

“Good boy,” aunty said again, her hands on his cheeks like he was her own grandson. “Very helpful. You’ll do well in life kannu.”

“I hope so,” Bharath said, smiling and touched by her words.

He turned and walked away, his backpack bouncing on his shoulders, exhaustion finally starting to creep in. But somewhere under that tiredness, he felt good. **Solid karma points**. That had to count for something. The gods were surely watching.

And now... Atlanta.

The long leg. The big flight. The beginning of everything.

Share to your friends

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Chapter 3: The Long Haul

[1,799 words]

He reached the Delta Airlines boarding area just as the queue was forming. The boarding agents looked vaguely annoyed, like people who didn’t enjoy smiling. The energy here was... different. Less charm, more compliance. Less Namaste sir, more follow protocol, don't ask stupid questions.

Still, he handed over his boarding pass, smiled hopefully at the stewardess - and received a blank, unblinking nod in return. She looked well built enough to give Rocky a run for his money.

Right, he thought. Not Emirates anymore. This is... rugged.

As he stepped into the plane, he let his eyes wander casually.

And there - just a few steps ahead - was her.

Lavender kurti girl.

She was wearing a grey hoodie now, hair still in a loose bun, a paperback novel in hand. Her backpack slung low on her shoulders. She looked like she hadn't slept either - eyes faintly puffy, but still glowing with that same effortless confidence.

She's on this flight too.

He felt a jolt of hope so intense it almost made him stand taller.

This is it. This is destiny. The sequel flight. This is where the plot picks up.

She paused near Row 40 and checked her ticket. Bharath's breath caught in his throat.

Come on... Row 42... please be 42B. Or 40C. Or even 39B. Anything near me. Just let me be in the radius of fate.

He glanced down at his own boarding pass.

42A.

He finally understood how those gamblers felt as they watched the roulette ball bounce around before it finally settled in its final slot.

Two rows behind.

He couldn't see where she ended up because the aisle was now jammed with passengers finding their seats and struggling with overhead luggage. He tried not to look too eager as he shuffled forward with the crowd.

The Delta flight felt more... cramped. The lighting was harsher, the seats stiffer, and the air not quite as fragrant. The stewardesses looked efficient - sure - but they also looked like they'd suplex you if you pressed the call button too many times.

Not the place for sky-bedroom dreams, he admitted.

He finally reached his seat and slipped into 42A - window this time, thank god - and looked around. Still no sign of lavender girl.

He was just about to indulge in an extended fantasy of how they'd end up sitting next to each other when a sudden squawk interrupted him.

A baby.

Loud. High-pitched. Agitated.

"Sorry, excuse me - "

A woman with tired eyes and a weary expression stood beside him, holding a toddler on her hip, diaper bag slung like a battlefield pack, and juggling a folded baby stroller handed to her by the steward.

She smiled apologetically.

"42B and C."

No!!!!!!!!!!

Bharath helped her stow her bag. The baby was already trying to grab the safety card out of the seat pocket.

She sat down with a grateful sigh and plopped the baby into her lap. "Sorry in advance. She usually sleeps after takeoff."

The baby, as if in defiance, let out another ear-piercing cry and threw a plastic giraffe onto the floor.

Sleep. That's what I need, Bharath told himself, even as he retrieved the giraffe and handed it back. This will all be over like a bad dream. He just needed to sleep for the next 14 hours now.

The mother smiled again. "You're sweet. First time going to the US?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, brace yourself."

Bharath chuckled weakly and turned toward the window.

So much for love at 30,000 feet.

Still, he tried to stay positive. Maybe the lavender kurti girl was somewhere on this flight. Maybe he'd run into her near the toilets. Maybe fate would seat them together *next* time. After all, this was just one day in the great American adventure ahead.

The baby yawned. So did Bharath.

His eyes were heavy now. The adrenaline had run out, the jet lag finally punching through. His limbs ached, his head felt light. His last thoughts were about how he was going to torture Mukund slowly for raising his hopes about joining the mile high club. Then, as he closed his eyes he thought of the lavender kurta girl - leaning against the airplane window, talking about her favorite music, asking him if he liked AR Rahman or R.E.M.

They would talk through the night. They would laugh. He would dazzle her with his wit and charm. She would swoon at his cricketer achievements and scholarly knowledge about computers. And by the time they landed in Atlanta, they would be in love.

But reality had other plans.

The baby squawked again.

And Bharath... finally... drifted off.

He stood blinking under the harsh fluorescence of U.S. Customs and Border Protection. His legs were stiff from the flight, his mouth tasted like cardboard, and his brain was fogged with sleep deprivation and recycled cabin air.

He had made it to the US.

Almost.

“Purpose of visit?” the customs officer asked, again.

“Uh... studies. I’m starting my undergraduate program at - ”

The officer held up a hand.

Bharath trailed off.

The man - white, crew-cut, sunburned across the cheeks - stared at Bharath’s I-20 form like it had personally offended him. He flipped through the stapled visa pages in Bharath’s passport with deliberate slowness, as if one of them might suddenly confess to a crime.

“Address in the U.S.?”

Bharath fumbled with his folder, trying to find the slip with the campus housing assignment. “Yes, sir, I have it right here - ”

“You should know it by heart.”

“I - I have it memorized too, it’s just - ”

“Say it.”

He recited it quickly.

The officer gave him a look of mild contempt, the kind that said *I don’t believe you*, even if he technically had no reason to detain him. His finger hovered over the stamp for another excruciating ten seconds.

Bharath could feel sweat trickling down his spine.

Finally - *ka-thump* - the stamp landed. Reluctantly. Like a favor.

“Next.”

No welcome. No “Have a nice stay.” No smile.

Just a wave toward the baggage claim.

Bharath trudged past the frosted glass doors into the echoing arrivals hall. There was no sign of the lavender kurta girl either. She had either gone through a different queue or passed through so quickly that she was long gone. Gone with her pretty bun and her unread paperback. Gone like a mirage.

The baggage carousel was still turning when he got there.

He waited. And waited. And waited.

People came and went. Families reunited. Children screamed. Trolleys squeaked under the weight of luggage and the occasional box of kitchen utensils from a cousin in Dubai.

Bharath spotted one of his bags first - the green one with the big red ribbon Amma had tied around the handle. He grabbed it and waited again.

Then came the second.

His big duffel bag. Or what was *left* of it.

The zipper was torn open at the side, one wheel was barely hanging on, and one of his vests was poking halfway out like it was trying to escape the scene of a crime.

He yanked it off the belt and stared.

Somewhere deep in the pile, he’d packed his backup hard drive, his transistor radio, and his stash of Maggi packets. Hopefully nothing had fallen out. Hopefully -

He dragged the bag toward the nearest Delta kiosk.

The woman behind the counter looked up with the enthusiasm of a corpse.

“My bag is damaged,” he said, holding it up.

She barely glanced at it. “Fill out this form.”

“I have class starting in two days - ”

“Form.”

He filled it out.

After ten minutes of tapping on her terminal and consulting a supervisor - who looked even more dead inside than she did - she handed him a small slip and a crisp ten-dollar bill.

“That’s it?” Bharath said.

“You want a voucher?”

“I mean - my bag is ruined - ”

“That’s the policy, sir.”

She said “sir” like it was an insult. What she really meant was, “Get out of my face you loser.”

Bharath stared at the bill.

Ten dollars.

He was tempted to ask if they also offered a tissue for wounded dignity.

Instead, he walked away defeated.

Outside, the Atlanta heat hit him like a slap.

Even though it was past 5 PM, the sun was still blazing, and the air was thick and humid - not all that different from Chennai, except it smelled faintly of diesel and something chemically clean.

He found a shady spot near a pillar and crouched to unzip his folder. Inside were all the documents he had collected for this moment - admission letter, housing slip, emergency

numbers, a printed map, a page of taxi fare estimates, and a photograph of his cousin Sandeep, who had helped him apply to college but now lived two states away.

He reached for the campus housing address.

And that's when it happened.

WHAM.

Someone collided with him hard enough to knock his folder out of his hands and scatter half its contents across the sidewalk.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry!"

The voice was melodic. Soft but panicked. And unmistakably American.

Bharath looked up - startled, blinking - and saw her. Violins played in the background and everything seemed to move in slow motion.

This was it! His boy-meets-girl moment. The one this day had tested him for and finally his karma had rewarded him with.

She was bending down quickly, scooping up his papers, hair falling across her face, a blur of perfume and sunlight.

She looked up again, a paper clenched in each hand.

"I didn't see you there, I'm Ayesha - " she paused, blinking. "Wait - are you okay?"

Her eyes were huge, warm brown, and framed by lashes that seemed to flicker in the sun.

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

"I'll get the rest - hold on."

She darted forward and grabbed his housing assignment from where it had skidded under a bench.

Then she smiled.

There was something angelic about her - in the way her voice wrapped around the chaos, in how easily she apologized, in the smile that made him feel like this had all happened for a reason.

“Here.” She handed the papers back and adjusted the strap of her tote bag. “Sorry again. Are you heading to the Georgia Tech campus?”

He nodded dumbly.

“Hey,” she called out from the curb, one hand raised slightly, the other holding her tote and duffel bag. “Me too! Freshman?”

Bharath was still trying to piece together his scattered thoughts when he blinked up at her.

She was standing by a yellow cab, smiling - not the perfunctory smile you give a stranger - but something sunnier, as if she'd already decided this wasn't just a coincidence.

He nodded. “Yeah... yeah, I am.”

“Wanna share a ride? Might as well split the fare.”

His voice almost cracked. “Sure.”

She smiled wider and waved him over. “I'm Ayesha. Ayesha Patel.”

“Bharath,” he replied, already fumbling with his bags, nearly tipping one over. “From... Chennai.”

“Nice,” she said, holding the door open for him as he slid into the seat beside her. “I'm from Jersey.”

“Yeah,” he nodded, not really registering what she was saying.

“Same. Georgia Tech, baby. Yellow Jackets all the way!”

The cab pulled out from the terminal, merging into traffic as the city skyline shimmered in the distance.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 4: Smith 202

[1,715 words]

Bharath tried not to stare. He really did.

But Ayesha Patel was easily the most stunning girl he had ever seen - not in a flashy, movie-star way, but in that casual, effortless way that somehow made it worse. It wasn't just the way she looked - though that alone was enough to render his brain into slow-motion playback.

She was fit - athletic even - with curves that made her simple jeans and tucked-in Georgia Tech tee shirt look like something off a fashion runway. Her hair fell in soft waves that bounced with every turn of her head. She looked like she could model for a Head and Shoulders commercial. Her eyes sparkled when she spoke. Her hands moved animatedly when she talked. Her voice - oh god, her voice - was the kind that made you want to confess your deepest secrets just to keep her talking.

She smelled faintly of citrus and something warm. Like honey. Or sin.

"You're lucky, you know," she said, propping one leg under her and facing him in the cab. "Georgia Tech is *amazing*. It's honestly one of the best schools in the U.S. for engineering. I mean, not that I'm doing engineering - God, no - but still. You're in for a ride."

Bharath nodded, trying to say something witty. Cool. Casual. What was that advice he'd read on Altavista forums? *Ask open-ended questions. Maintain eye contact. Tilt your head slightly to appear thoughtful.*

He couldn't do any of it. His face was frozen in a stunned half-smile, his limbs unusually stiff, and his brain incapable of producing anything more complex than *she's talking to me*.

"I'm doing psych," she said, flicking a strand of hair back. "The psych department's pretty good here. Not Ivy League-level or whatever, but solid. Way less pressure too."

He blinked. "You didn't... want to go to an Ivy League school?"

She laughed. "Oh, I got into Princeton. My parents still haven't forgiven me."

"You didn't go?"

"Hell no," she said. "Too many people I know. I wanted a *fresh* start, you know? Somewhere I didn't have to keep explaining who I was supposed to be. And besides,

Princeton's way more expensive for undergrad living costs. Georgia Tech made more sense. And it's warmer. Also... the South is just more interesting. I wanted a little chaos."

Bharath nodded again, dumbly. *Chaos. Yes. Me too. Absolute internal chaos.*

She continued, breezily. "Plus, it's good for keeping your Indian parents at a distance. You pick a top school that's also far enough, and suddenly they're not showing up every weekend with a pressure cooker and opinions."

He chuckled, finally, and managed to say, "That's... clever."

She grinned. "You've gotta work the system, Bharath-from-Chennai. Otherwise, the system works you."

He laughed again - this time a little more naturally - and then immediately cursed himself for laughing weirdly. He had no idea what he was doing. Every article he'd read before coming had evaporated from his mind. Every tip about "being irresistible" was gone. All he could do was nod and smile and try not to look at her lips too much.

The cab curved off the highway, entering the more residential, tree-lined lanes near Georgia Tech's campus. A sign flashed by: *Welcome to Georgia Institute of Technology.*

Bharath could've sworn it glowed.

Ayesha leaned forward. "Smith dorm's this one, right?" she asked the driver.

"Yes, ma'am," the cabbie muttered, pulling to a stop.

Bharath peered out. A low, brick building with ivy-covered edges and wide steps. A few students were already dragging suitcases inside. It didn't look glamorous. But it looked... real.

This was it.

"Looks like you're here," Ayesha said, nudging him gently. "I'm two dorms down. Still East Campus, though."

"Oh."

They both stepped out. Bharath fumbled for his wallet, but Ayesha waved it off. "I'll split the fare. Let's not do the whole polite 'you take it-no you take it' routine. We're equals here, Bharath-from-Chennai."

He smiled and handed her a five-dollar bill. "Deal."

They pulled their bags out from the trunk. She stood beside him for a second, shading her eyes with her hand.

“Well, welcome to Tech,” she said, looping her duffel over one shoulder. “Maybe I’ll see you around, yeah?”

“Yeah,” he replied, his throat suddenly dry. “Totally.”

She grinned again and turned to walk away, hips swaying with casual confidence, her voice fading behind her as she called someone on her phone.

He stood there frozen for a long time, just watching her go. Her figure getting smaller and smaller until she disappeared around the building corner.

His hand was still gripping his folder. His duffel bag was half-tipped on its side.

He was smiling.

That’s it, he thought. That’s her. That’s the one. Lavender kurti girl was a warm-up. Ayesha is the real deal.

Everything else faded - the rude customs guy, the broken bag, the ten dollars, the crying baby. All gone.

This was his new beginning.

And maybe - just maybe - his new girlfriend.

He didn’t even notice the RA coming out to greet him until she tapped him on the shoulder.

“You Bharath? Smith 202, right?”

“Huh? Oh. Yes. That’s me.”

“Welcome to Georgia Tech,” she said, handing him his room key.

Bharath nodded. But his mind was still two dorms away.

Bharath dragged his broken duffel bag up the last step, his fingers cramping around the handle. The corridor smelled faintly of industrial cleaner and college-boy musk - a mix of deodorant, wet socks, and something mysterious that might once have been pizza.

The plaque on the door read: 202.

He took a breath, bracing himself for whatever came next.

Inside, the room was already half-lived-in.

There were three bunk beds in the room. Two in a separate larger room had already been occupied. The only available bunk bed was in a tiny room that had the door to the passage.

Each bunk bed had a large desk with a chair and a cabinet. There was another larger clothes cabinet along the wall. He spied inside the larger room. One desk had been claimed and covered with personal items: a boombox, textbooks, a poster of a bikini-clad woman on a motorcycle, some protein powder tubs, a laptop, a shoebox stuffed with wires.

The other had some books and a suitcase on it.

He sighed.

So much for first come, first served.

“Yo,” a voice called out from the far corner. “That you, roomie?”

Bharath turned.

And blinked.

The guy standing there looked - at first glance - like a regular white dude. Pale skin, light-colored eyes, blondish buzz-cut. But then Bharath noticed... the clothes.

Baggy jeans hanging halfway down his hips. An oversized jersey that read Atlanta Falcons on it. A thick silver chain around his neck. A cap turned sideways. Sneakers so spotless they looked like they'd been bought five minutes ago.

And the swagger. He walked like he was gliding on bass lines. He raised his hand in what Bharath could only describe as an elaborate handshake-fistbump motion and said, “What it do, bro?”

Bharath blinked again.

“Uhh... hello.”

“I’m Tyrel. ATL born and raised. Welcome to the land of peaches, grits, and bad bitches.”

Bharath had absolutely no idea what that meant.

Before he could respond, a second figure emerged from behind the wardrobe divider - a shorter, slimmer boy with neatly combed black hair, wire-rimmed glasses, and a warm if

slightly nervous smile. His face had an East Asian cast to it, and he wore a T-shirt that read *I love CS*.

Bharath, remembering everything he'd ever seen in a Bruce Lee movie, immediately pressed his palms together and bowed low.

"Nice to meet you," he said solemnly.

The boy looked stunned.

Tyrel let out a bark of laughter from his bunk. "DAAAMN! You just bowed to Jorge!"

"Is that not...?"

"I'm not... uh... Japanese," the boy said politely. "I'm from Bolivia."

Bharath stood upright, flustered. "Oh. I thought - I mean, I assumed - "

"It's okay," the boy said. "You're not the first."

Tyrel was still laughing, wiping his eyes now. "My man said *konnichiwa*, but Jorge be speaking straight-up Spanish, dawg."

Bharath stared. "Wait... your name is... George?"

"No, no," the boy corrected him, adjusting his glasses. "It's pronounced *Hor-hay*. With an H sound. In Spanish, 'J' is pronounced like 'H'."

Bharath blinked again, processing this.

Tyrel leaned back on his bunk, grinning. "Bro's getting a crash course in multiculturalism tonight. Welcome to Tech, my dude."

Bharath looked between them - the Bolivian who wasn't Japanese, the white guy who talked like he came out of a Tupac video. This was going to be something.

Later that night, after they'd unpacked most of his things, Jorge helped Bharath plug in the Ethernet cable to his desk and showed him how to connect to the Georgia Tech network. Tyrel played an entire Outkast CD on loop while doing pushups shirtless in the corner.

"Why do you wear your pants so low?" Bharath asked innocently.

Tyrel smirked. "'Cause I ain't no sucker. Gotta let the world know I'm real."

"Your... underwear is showing."

“That’s the *point*, my man.”

“Oh.”

Jorge was too polite to laugh, but he smiled sympathetically.

“You’ll get used to it,” he said. “Tyrel’s an acquired taste.”

“I’m like hot sauce,” Tyrel said, still mid-rep. “Spicy, messy, and makes you sweat.”

Bharath wasn’t sure what to do with that, so he just nodded and started setting up his tiny desk. He unzipped his pencil case, gently placed his treasured Natraj HB pencils in the drawer, and set his folded timetable on the wall with a bit of tape.

As he did, he found himself glancing at the door.

Two dorms down.

Ayesha.

That smile. That voice. That effortless way she carried herself.

He still couldn’t believe she was real.

He had arrived in America expecting the unexpected - but he hadn’t expected this. New accents, new roommates, new customs, and a girl who had already scrambled everything in his brain just by existing.

Tyrel leaned over suddenly and whispered, “You look like you in love, bro. Who is it?”

“What? No. Nothing.”

Tyrel raised an eyebrow. “Uh huh.”

Jorge chuckled. “Let him be. He’s still jet-lagged.”

Bharath didn’t respond.

He sat on the lower bunk, pulled the sheet over his knees, and stared at the ceiling fan spinning slowly overhead.

Outside the window, Atlanta buzzed - distant car horns, the faint bass of someone’s stereo, the rustle of leaves.

He had made it.

Across oceans, continents, cultural landmines.

From Amma's kitchen to a dorm room in Georgia.

And yet, his story didn't feel like it was beginning now.

It felt like it had already begun - back at the taxi curb, with a smile and a voice that still echoed in his ears.

Maybe tomorrow he'd see her again.

Maybe this was his real American dream.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 5: First Morning Shock

[1,406 words]

The shrill beeps of his new alarm clock jolted Bharath awake.

He sat up in his bottom bunk, groggy, confused for a second about where he was. The room was quiet, save for the faint hum of Tyrel's electric fan and the rustle of Jorge flipping pages above.

And then it hit him.

Today was Orientation Day.

His first real day as a student at Georgia Tech.

He swung his legs out of bed, feeling the cool linoleum floor beneath his bare feet, and reached for his towel and toothbrush. The sky outside was still painted in that faint blue that precedes sunrise. The dorm hallway smelled faintly of body spray, boiled eggs, and Pine-Sol.

The bathroom was just a few doors down.

He stepped inside, rubbing sleep from his eyes - and stopped.

Dead in his tracks.

There, standing just a few feet away under a stream of water, was a man.

A very naked man.

Showering. Casually. Completely exposed.

No curtain. No partition. Just a tiled row of open showers with no regard for modesty, shame, or basic human decency.

Bharath froze, toothbrush in mid-air.

“Kadavuale! Enna kandravi ithu! (Oh my god! What the hell is this!)”

The guy in the shower glanced at him once, nodded, and then went back to lathering shampoo into his hair like this was the most normal thing in the world.

Bharath backed away like he'd walked in on a crime scene.

Back in his room, he dropped his towel on the chair, breathing fast.

He stood there, soap in hand, heart pounding like he'd just escaped a battlefield.

“¿Qué pasó, pues? What happened?” Jorge asked from his bunk, his head poking over the edge.

“No curtains!” Bharath whispered, horrified. “Nothing! Everyone can see everything!”

Jorge gave him a sympathetic smile. “Yeah. I found out yesterday.”

“How did you - ?”

“Just... stared at the wall and prayed no one talked to me. You'll get used to it.”

Tyrel, now awake and lazily stretching, yawned. “Man, y'all modesty dudes need to loosen up. This be college. Everybody got the same parts, bro.”

“I am not used to seeing others... parts,” Bharath muttered.

Tyrel laughed. “You'll learn.”

Ten minutes later, Bharath re-entered the bathroom like a soldier marching into enemy territory. He carried only the essentials: soap, towel, and shame.

He picked the furthest showerhead from the entrance, turned it on, and stepped under the spray as quickly as he could, eyes fixed squarely on the wall tiles.

The water was cold. His breath hitched. But nothing was worse than the *exposure*.

He soaped, rinsed, and dried off in record time - maybe ninety seconds total.

Back in the room, hair dripping, he collapsed onto the chair.

Jorge handed him a granola bar.

“You survived.”

“Barely.”

Tyrel was already dressed in his usual oversized jeans and Falcons jersey, grinning.

“Congrats, dawg. You just earned your first stripes in the college game.”

Bharath took a bite of the granola bar and made a vow to himself.

Never again after 7 a.m. Too many people. Next time, 5 a.m. or never.

Later as the inhabitants of Smith 202 strolled towards the Dining hall for breakfast, they people watched as students were still moving in a day before classes.

Every hallway they passed on the way to the dining commons was cluttered with boxes, duffel bags, plastic bins, and families saying long, awkward goodbyes. Nervous mothers dabbed at eyes with handkerchiefs. Dads barked last-minute advice. Roommates half-ignored each other as they set up their territories.

And yet, for all the movement, one thing struck Bharath more than anything else.

It was almost all men.

Guys everywhere. Guys in Tech shirts. Guys in cargo shorts. Guys dragging mini-fridges. Guys with goatees. Guys with pimples. Loud guys, silent guys, sweaty guys, sleepy guys.

It was like someone had air-dropped a small army of nerds into the campus.

Occasionally, like a fleeting mirage, a girl would appear.

Usually surrounded by a ring of guys orbiting her like planets around a sun. Some helping with luggage. Some laughing too hard at her jokes. Some pretending not to look at her while very obviously looking at her.

Bharath whispered to Jorge, "I thought there would be... more girls."

Jorge shrugged. "Me too. If I knew it would be like this I would have stayed in Bolivia!"

Tyrel laughed. "Welcome to the ratio, my man."

Bharath frowned. "The what now?"

Tyrel clapped a hand on his shoulder like he was about to break terrible news. "At Tech? It's like five guys for every girl. No joke. Sometimes six. Depends how many of the girls are actually real and not just mirages."

Jorge raised his eyebrows. "You're kidding."

"Do I look like I'm playin'?" Tyrel gestured around them. "Look - guys in Tech shirts, guys with pocket protectors, guys who think Axe spray is a substitute for a shower. This ain't a college. It's a bachelor colony."

Bharath nodded slowly, eyes scanning another all-male cluster helping unload a single girl's car like worker ants. "So... there are no girls here?"

Tyrel grinned. "Oh, they exist. But they're rare. Like holograms. And if one's halfway cute and breathes oxygen? Boom - she's got three dudes carrying her laundry and five more offering to recompile her Java homework."

Jorge snorted. "I thought this was just a first-day thing."

"Nah," Tyrel said with mock solemnity. "This is life at Tech, bro. You picked the nerd capital of the South."

Bharath groaned. "I thought college in America was supposed to be... fun."

Tyrel pointed dramatically east, toward the nearby buildings past the edge of Smith dorm. "And that's where salvation lies. Right across the tracks. Georgia State."

Bharath blinked. "Wait. That close?"

"Practically next door," Tyrel said. "From Smith? You can see their dorms. And unlike us, they actually got a normal ratio. Girls everywhere. Real majors too - psych, journalism, sociology. People who smile. People who've read a book that wasn't a textbook."

Jorge laughed. "So your plan is to invade?"

Tyrel smirked. "Already got missions planned. Operation Co-Ed Freedom. We hit their dining hall like cultural ambassadors. I charm 'em, y'all play the strong silent type."

"I don't know..." Bharath began.

Tyrel threw an arm around Bharath's shoulder. "We'll get you a Georgia State girlfriend by midterms. Just gotta get you some better clothes, better cologne, and a little more swagger."

"I already have cologne," Bharath muttered. "It's called Wild Stone."

Tyrel raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, you're definitely not wearing that around girls who can read." He then gave them both a proud once-over. "We're like an engineering boy band."

Bharath blinked. "Like... the Backstreet Boys? The girls back home like that Nick guy."

Jorge perked up. "Ooh - *NSYNC, bro. I call Justin."

Tyrel reeled back like he'd just been slapped with a physics textbook. "Yo, yo, *what?* What did you just say?"

Bharath looked genuinely confused. "Backstreet Boys. They're huge! I bought the cassette before I left Chennai."

Jorge shrugged. "*NSYNC has better choreography."

"Okay, okay, I'mma need y'all to stop right there," Tyrel said, waving his hands like he was extinguishing a fire. "Never - and I mean *never* - say that crap in front of any girls. In fact don't say it in front of anyone. Boys or girls. Y'all tryna be cute or tryna be celibate?"

Bharath tilted his head. "But they're popular right? I've seen all the screaming girls on MTV"

"*NSYNC is the better band hermano. They're like Ricky Martin and Enrique Igesias rolled into one."

Tyrel gasped as he listened to these two boys speak.

"Let me say this and say this once. You know who likes these bands? *Middle schoolers*," Tyrel snapped. "You trying to bag a date or run a babysitting service?"

Jorge leaned in, mock-whispering. "He's just mad he can't hit the high notes."

Tyrel pointed at him. "Say one more word and I'm making you wear a 'Team Lance' shirt to the student mixer."

"I don't mind", said Jorge. My ex-girlfriend likes him the best.

Bharath chuckled, now genuinely enjoying the chaos. “Okay, okay. So what do we listen to, *oh wise one?*”

Tyrel straightened his cap. “Lauryn Hill. DMX. Maybe a little Aaliyah if you’re feeling smooth. But no boy bands, man. That’s a one-way ticket to Rejection Town.”

Jorge raised an eyebrow. “You made that up just now, didn’t you? That’s not a real place is it?”

Tyrel smirked. “You bet your ass I did. Now come on - time to fuel up. Game faces on.”

Bharath looked skeptical. “And what exactly do we tell them we’re studying?”

“Lie,” Tyrel said immediately. “Say marketing. Or pre-law. Or poetry. Whatever. Just don’t say engineering or computer science unless you wanna be rejected immediately.”

Jorge burst out laughing.

Bharath sighed as they entered the dining commons, the din of trays and the smell of eggs and floor polish hitting them at once.

College had officially begun.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 6: Breakfast Betrayal

[2,156 words]

The dining hall was bright, clinical, and smelled like a mixture of dish soap and grease. It was bustling with students - trays clattering, chairs scraping, voices overlapping. Bharath followed Tyrel and Jorge to the hot food counter first and immediately regretted it.

Most of the trays looked like they’d been sitting there for hours. Bacon that glistened with too much grease. Sausages floating in orange pools of oil. Grayish eggs that looked like they had given up on life.

Tyrel, unfazed, scooped a pile of the eggs onto his plate like he was mining for gold. “Mmm. Protein, baby,” he said, grabbing two round, doughy-looking objects. “Biscuits. Southern-style, baby.”

He drowned them in a ladleful of some beige sludge the server called “gravy.”

Bharath tilted his head. “Wait. Biscuits?”

He leaned in and poked one gently with the end of his fork like it might react. “These are not biscuits. Where’s the sugar? The... crunch? That looks like a bread roll.”

Tyrel looked at him like he’d just asked why cows don’t wear socks. “Bro, what? No, no, these ain’t sweet biscuits. These are the *real* deal. You put gravy on ‘em. Eat ‘em with sausage. Country-style.”

“Biscuits are supposed to be sweet or sometimes salty!” Bharath hissed. “At home, they come in shiny wrappers. They’re crunchy. You dip them in tea!”

Jorge snorted. “I think he means cookies.”

Bharath turned to the server helplessly. “You call *this* a biscuit?”

The woman behind the counter, worn down by decades of incoming freshmen, just smiled. “You want one, sugar?”

“I want... cereal,” Bharath muttered. “Just cereal. Please.”

“That way honey. In the bins on the other side of the wall.”

He moved down the line with the wounded dignity of a man who had trusted the word *biscuit* and been betrayed after thanking the kind lady.

Jorge wasn’t faring much better.

He eyed the meat tray skeptically, then pointed at the sausages. “What are these swimming in? Did someone cook them in engine oil?”

“Grease, honey,” the server said cheerfully, slapping three onto his tray. “That’s flavor!”

“Is there a no-grease option?” he asked.

“You want a salad?”

Jorge grimaced and shook his head. “I’ll just take toast. Maybe some fruit.”

The toast turned out to be slightly damp and inexplicably warm in the middle but cold on the edges. The fruit looked like it had been cut by someone holding a grudge against cantaloupe.

The cereal section was a rainbow explosion.

Bright plastic bins with plastic handles. Cartoons on the sides. Loops, flakes, squares, and tiny puffed balls in every unnatural color imaginable.

He filled a bowl with something that looked like neon-colored cardboard confetti and added a splash of milk.

Jorge chose something darker with raisins and frowned at the milk-to-cereal ratio.

They sat down at a long communal table near the window.

Tyrel was already halfway through his biscuit-and-gravy massacre, humming to himself.

Bharath took a spoonful of cereal. *Crunch.*

Sweet. Then too sweet.

Then... oddly addictive.

But still, his tongue yearned for something warm. Something *real*. Idli. Pongal. A spoonful of spicy chutney. Filter coffee served in a steel tumbler with bubbles at the top.

This... was not that.

He chewed quietly, trying not to grimace.

So this is breakfast now.

They sat down at a table near the window, where Tyrel was already halfway through one of his biscuit-mountain creations and humming a tune that sounded suspiciously like "No Scrubs."

"This is a crime," Bharath said, poking at the floating cornflakes that had somehow gone soggy between the counter and the table. "Why does the milk taste like... metal?"

"It's powdered milk," Jorge said, biting into a piece of watermelon and immediately regretting it. "And the fruit is frozen. I think my tongue is stuck."

Tyrel looked up. "Y'all delicate little flowers better toughen up. This is what champions eat. Look at this biscuit. It's basically a warm hug with lard."

Jorge made a face. "I think my toast just sighed. Like, actually exhaled."

Bharath sighed, chewing slowly. "In India, my mother made idli and sambar fresh every morning. With coconut chutney."

Jorge nodded wistfully. "Back home, we had arepas with cheese and scrambled eggs. Real eggs. Happy eggs."

Tyrel, mid-chew, waved his fork. "Y'all ain't in Kansas anymore, Dorothy. This here's Tech. If the homework don't kill you, the breakfast will."

Bharath put down his spoon. "You know, I thought the hardest part of coming to America would be culture shock or homesickness."

"And?"

He stared down at his cereal. "Turns out it's breakfast."

They all went quiet for a moment. Then Jorge picked up one of Tyrel's biscuits and slowly peeled it open. Steam rose from the middle like the gates of hell had been cracked open.

He blinked. "Okay, this might be good if it didn't smell like boiled pepper spray."

Tyrel grinned. "You just gotta drown it in gravy. Like so." He poured another spoonful of the goopy sauce onto Jorge's plate.

Jorge stared at it.

Bharath stared at it.

Even the biscuit seemed unsure about what it had become.

"I think I'll fast until lunch," Bharath said finally.

"Lunch is worse," Tyrel said brightly.

After breakfast, the dining hall emptied out like the tide pulling back. Students streamed toward the auditorium, others lingered in pockets of nervous chatter and brochure-flipping. Bharath had just returned his tray when he spotted her again.

Ayesha.

Walking alone now, brushing a few strands of hair from her face, a folded campus map clutched in one hand. Her steps were unhurried. Her shoulders a little looser. No crowd around her this time.

Before he could overthink it, he walked faster to catch up.

“Hey,” he called, trying not to sound out of breath.

She turned, a light in her eyes. “Heyyy! Bharath-from-Chennai, right?”

His heart jumped. “Yeah. Good memory.”

“Hard to forget,” she said with a smile, slipping the map into her tote bag. “You settling in okay?”

“Trying to,” he said. “Breakfast was... new.”

Ayesha wrinkled her nose. “That gravy looks like someone mixed flour with regret.”

He laughed - a surprised, warm sound - and felt the tension slide off his shoulders. Her rhythm was easy. Her voice, familiar. For a second, it felt like the start of something. A tether forming in mid-air.

“I’ve only been here one day and I already miss proper spice,” she said, animated. “Even the ‘hot sauce’ is just... angry ketchup.”

“Exactly!” he said, grinning. “I didn’t expect - ”

“God, *who* is yelling about ketchup?” a new voice cut in.

A girl walked up beside Ayesha, tall and unbothered, like the sidewalk belonged to her. Zara.

She was Indian, yes - but slick, polished, intimidating in a way that felt calculated. Her gold hoops swayed as she walked. Her crop top sparkled in the sun. She took one look at Bharath and visibly recoiled.

Ayesha turned. “Oh! Zara - this is Bharath. We met at the airport. He just got in from - ”

“Let me guess,” Zara cut in, squinting at him like he was a badly dressed insect. “India. Obviously.”

She gave him a long, slow once-over. The kind of look meant to flatten.

“Fresh-off-the-boat much?”

Bharath blinked. “Sorry?”

“FOB, sweetie. Fresh Off the Boat. I mean - look at you.” She gestured at his polo shirt and scuffed sneakers. “Did your mummy pack your clothes too? Or just your lunch?”

Tyrel and Jorge, loitering nearby with trays in hand, froze mid-step. Tyrel's smirk faded instantly.

Zara leaned in, eyes gleaming. "Let me guess. First time on a plane? First time out of the country? Still doing that little head-bobble thing every time someone talks?"

Bharath's throat tightened. He opened his mouth. Closed it.

"I think it's sweet," Zara added with mock sincerity. "You're like a walking Microsoft Helpdesk. All earnest and awkward. You'll be very useful around finals week."

He glanced at Ayesha.

Her face had changed - the light dimmed, her smile gone. She looked... embarrassed. But not for him.

She didn't say anything. Didn't correct her. Didn't move.

Zara kept going. "You should try not to talk so much. That accent? It's giving *tech support with no refund*. Maybe stick to... silent nodding?"

Jorge muttered, "Jesus Christ," under his breath.

Tyrel took a step forward, jaw tight. "Yo, is she for real right now?"

Bharath didn't hear them.

He was staring at Ayesha. Just her. One more chance for her to say something. To stop this. But Ayesha just shifted her weight, looking off to the side. Like she didn't know him. Zara looped her arm through Ayesha's with a satisfied smirk. "Come on, babe. Let's not be late. Some of us don't need a compass to find the main quad."

And Ayesha let herself be led. She didn't resist. Didn't say his name. She turned once, eyes flicking toward him - and then away just as quickly.

Gone.

Bharath stood there, frozen in the sunlight. A breeze lifted the edge of the campus map in his pocket, but he didn't move. The hurt didn't hit him all at once. It seeped in - slow, numbing. Like ink bleeding through water. He stared at the space Ayesha had just vacated, her absence louder than anything she'd said. The noise around him resumed: conversations, footsteps, someone playing hacky sack on the lawn. But it all felt muffled. Distant.

Behind him, there was a long pause.

“Damn,” Tyrel muttered. “That girl was cold.”

Bharath turned, startled. He hadn’t realized they’d followed him out of the hall.

Tyrel and Jorge stood a few feet away, no longer joking, no longer laughing. Jorge’s brow was furrowed, his arms crossed.

“Bro,” Jorge said quietly, “you good?”

Bharath tried to nod. “I’m... fine.”

Tyrel stepped forward. “Look, man. I ain’t gonna lie - that girl’s a dime, but even baddies got limits. What she just did?” He shook his head. “That wasn’t confidence. That was straight-up cruelty.”

Bharath looked down, his voice low. “I didn’t expect her to... stand up for me. But I didn’t think she’d just let it happen.”

“She didn’t just let it happen,” Jorge said. “She cosigned it. Walked off like you were a piece of trash for being from where you’re from.”

Bharath swallowed hard. His chest was tight, like something inside had cracked without breaking clean.

Tyrel clapped a hand gently on his back. “Forget her. You don’t need that kind of fake energy, man. You got us. And you got a whole campus to explore. Plenty of people here who’ll see you for *you* - not your accent or your visa stamp.”

Bharath managed a faint smile. “Thanks, guys.”

“Anytime,” Jorge said. “And listen, if I ever hear someone talk to you like that again, I’m throwing my cafeteria tray at their head.”

That drew a real laugh from Bharath - small, but genuine.

Just then, another voice joined in.

“What a bitch,” someone said bluntly.

They turned.

A tall, fair-skinned Indian guy with slightly messy hair and a vending machine soda in hand walked up, eyes sharp and full of mischief.

“Don’t mind her,” the guy said. “There’s a whole category of desi girls here who think being born in the U.S. makes them royalty. And anyone from back home is, like, provincial. Peasants. Software technicians. Whatever.”

Bharath blinked. “Uh... thanks?”

The guy grinned and stuck out his hand. “Ravi. From Delhi. Cloudman Hall.”

Bharath shook it. “Bharath. Smith.”

“First year?”

“Yeah. CS.”

“Same.” Ravi took a loud sip of soda. “Cool. We’ll suffer together.”

Jorge smirked. “Hey, another CS nerd! That makes the three of us!”

“CS nerds unite!” Ravi said, giving a little salute. “Anyone who survives orientation gravy and girls like that deserves a medal.”

“You’re CS too? Argh... looks like I’m going to be surrounded by nerds”, groaned Tyrel.

They found a low brick planter near the edge of the student center and sat side by side. Ravi popped his soda again and leaned back like he was preparing for a rant.

“Honestly,” he began, “this place is not what I expected.”

Bharath looked over. “Right? Same!”

“I thought American campus life would be like what they show in the movies - parties, concerts, smart women in glasses quoting poetry. But it’s mostly...” He gestured vaguely at a passing group of sweaty, shirtless engineering boys yelling about Dungeons & Dragons.

Bharath nodded. “And everyone eats... cereal. For every meal.”

“No dahi-chawal. No masala. I asked someone where I could get something with some heat and they offered me... a bottle of Tabasco.”

They both paused.

Then started laughing.

It was easy laughter. Shared. Cathartic.

For the first time since arriving, Bharath didn't feel like he was tiptoeing on cultural landmines. He didn't have to explain himself. Or pretend to be impressed by sausage gravy.

"I even brought my own pickle jar," Ravi confessed. "Wrapped it in socks so my suitcase wouldn't smell."

"I brought rasam powder," Bharath grinned. "Customs made me open it. Thought it was some drug."

They laughed again.

For the next half hour, they shared everything - bad food, baffling slang, the shock of public showers, confusing girls, and how no one seemed to understand cricket.

And slowly, Bharath began to feel a little lighter.

A little more like himself.

Not quite at home - but not entirely lost either.

"We'll catch up later?" Ravi said, adjusting the strap of his backpack.

"Definitely," Bharath replied.

"There's an Indian Students' Association meet tonight - student center, I think. Food, music, probably at least one guy trying too hard to impress everyone. You in?"

"Of course," Bharath said without thinking. "Let's go after orientation."

"Done." Ravi grinned and disappeared into a stream of freshmen heading toward the auditorium.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 7: Crushed on the Quad

[1,898 words]

Bharath lingered for a moment near the steps.

The sun was fully up now, warm on his skin, sharpening the angles of the buildings and casting long shadows over the campus lawn. A light breeze stirred the trees, and somewhere nearby, someone was playing a guitar - lazy, open chords. The air felt alive, like something beginning.

And then - like gravity - his eyes found her again.

Ayesha.

She was sitting on a wide picnic blanket near the far end of the quad, surrounded by a semi-circle of students. A mix of people - well-dressed, confident, loud - the kind who already seemed to belong to each other. They were playing some kind of game. Charades, maybe. Ayesha was up now, running in place and flailing her arms dramatically like she was being attacked by invisible bees.

The crowd around her burst into laughter and applause.

She looked radiant. Comfortable. Already part of the world Bharath had just stepped into. He stood watching her, heart caught in his throat.

He hesitated, then walked toward them, rehearsing a line in his head.

Hey, I didn't know you were out here.

Want to grab a drink after orientation?

Something casual. Friendly. Just enough to reopen the door.

As he crossed the lawn, Ayesha turned briefly to sip from a water bottle - and her eyes met his.

Just for a second.

Recognition. No warmth.

Then she turned back without a word, her expression unchanged.

Still, he kept walking.

"Hey," he said softly as he reached the edge of the group.

A few people looked up. One or two gave him the polite, tight-lipped half-smile strangers reserve for harmless interruptions.

Ayesha didn't say anything.

Zara, lounging beside her in a pink halter top and mirrored sunglasses, turned with the precision of someone who *lived* to turn dramatically.

“Oh *wow*,” she said. “It’s you again.”

Bharath blinked. “I just saw Ayesha and thought - ”

Zara laughed. Not a real laugh - a dagger dressed in glitter. “You *thought* what? That she was waiting for you? Sitting here hoping you’d come rescue her from her popularity?”

The people nearby chuckled, unsure, watching.

“I just - ” Bharath started.

“Oh my God,” Zara interrupted. “He’s like a lost puppy that followed you from breakfast. Do you feed him, or does he just keep showing up on his own?”

A few more snickers. A guy in sunglasses murmured, “Damn...”

Bharath’s ears burned. He looked at Ayesha.

She wasn’t laughing. But she wasn’t stopping it either.

She leaned back on one arm, her face unreadable behind her large sunglasses. Her silence was louder than any insult.

Zara pressed on. “Sweetie, we’re kind of in the middle of something. Orientation, remember? You can’t just walk up to every girl who makes eye contact and assume it’s destiny.”

Bharath tried to swallow. “I didn’t - ”

“Don’t worry,” she added sweetly. “It’s cute, in a desperate kind of way. Like, try-hard energy. You should bottle that and sell it at the Desperate Dudes Store.”

That broke the group. Laughter rippled through the blanket. Someone clapped.

Ayesha’s mouth curved slightly - not quite a smile, but not quite guilt either. A flicker of amusement, maybe. Maybe relief that Zara was handling it so she didn’t have to.

And that - that was worse than anything.

Bharath didn’t say another word.

He just nodded once, woodenly, turned, and walked away.

Behind him, he heard Zara mutter, "These FOB guys, I swear... Think every girl in America is a Bollywood heroine waiting for a backup dancer."

And Ayesha's low laugh in response.

That one sound - casual, soft, unthinking - broke something.

Bharath kept walking.

He didn't know where. Just away. Away from the heat on his neck, the eyes that had watched, the laughter still ringing in his ears.

His map crinkled in his back pocket.

He shoved his hands into his jeans, head low, footsteps quickening until the noise behind him disappeared.

His chest felt hollow. His stomach twisted.

Whatever lightness he had found with Ravi, whatever warmth he'd felt in Ayesha's eyes hours ago - it was gone now. Not stolen. Not lost. *Given up*. By her. Willingly.

Smith Hall was quieter now. Most of the first-years were still off pretending to care about orientation or wandering campus in dazed herds, clutching maps like they were navigating the Amazon.

Bharath pushed open the door to Room 202 and walked into... chaos.

Jorge was sitting cross-legged on his bunk like a monk preparing for spiritual battle, eyes closed, bobbing his head to a rhythm pulsing through his bulky headphones. A portable CD player sat beside him like a holy relic.

Tyrel, shirtless (again), was slouched dramatically against the windowsill, chewing gum like it had personally insulted him. His arms were crossed. His jaw was set.

"What did I say, man?" Tyrel said, louder than necessary. "It's just *noise*."

Jorge whipped off his headphones, scandalized. "It's *rhythm*, pendejo. It's heat. *Reggaetón es vida*."

Tyrel gestured broadly like he was dismissing a mosquito. "Nah, man. That ain't life. That's just someone banging on pots and yelling over it in Spanish."

"You don't even *speak* Spanish!"

“You don’t *need* to speak Spanish to know when something sounds like a blender trying to sing!”

Bharath froze in the doorway, still wearing his backpack. “Is... is this a fight?”

“It’s a *debate*,” Jorge snapped.

“It’s an *intervention*,” Tyrel corrected.

“About music,” Jorge added, as if that explained everything.

Tyrel pointed a dramatic finger at the CD player. “This fool tried to say reggaetón is better than Tupac.”

“Because it *is*! You can *dance* to it. You can *live* to it!”

“You can *die* to it, too. From embarrassment.”

They both turned to Bharath.

“Settle this,” Jorge demanded. “Best music. Go.”

Bharath blinked. “...I like the Backstreet Boys? Garbage? Illayaraja?”

Dead silence.

Even the CD player seemed to stop spinning in protest.

“You *what*?” Tyrel said slowly, as if he hadn’t heard right. “I thought you were just funning when you said that the first time.”

“Backstreet Boys,” Bharath repeated. “You know... *I Want It That Way*? Everybody back home loves them. I had their poster. I knew all the dance moves.”

Tyrel nearly fell off the windowsill laughing. “Oh hell *no*.”

Jorge squinted at Bharath like he was trying to see if he was real. “Seriously?”

“They’re catchy!” Bharath insisted. “In Chennai, everyone knew the lyrics. Girls made mixtapes. Boys sang *As Long As You Love Me* at cultural fest competitions. It’s a thing!”

Tyrel wiped a tear from his eye. “Bro. You just confessed to musical war crimes.”

“They’re not even the best boy band,” Jorge muttered.

Tyrel turned, shocked. “Don’t tell me you’re about to - ”

“N’SYNC is better,” Jorge said firmly.

Tyrel threw his gum at him.

“Yeah,” Jorge said. “But N’SYNC has Justin Timberlake.”

“And Backstreet has - who even *was* in Backstreet?” Tyrel said. “Like seven generic white dudes and a fog machine?”

Bharath frowned. “Nick Carter! He is *very* popular with the ladies!”

“You know who else is popular?” Tyrel said. “Chicken nuggets. Doesn’t mean they’re music.”

Bharath sat down slowly on his bunk, as if the very foundation of his adolescence had been yanked out from under him. “Back home, this got you *respect*. People cheered when you sang Backstreet at karaoke night.”

Tyrel snorted. “Here, that’ll get you kicked out of parties.”

Jorge nodded solemnly. “Or forced to wear a denim vest ironically.”

Bharath sighed. “Do you guys at least know A.R. Rahman?”

Tyrel blinked. “Who?”

“Bless you?” Jorge said.

“Never mind.”

A beat of silence passed. Then Jorge, ever defiant, put his headphones back on and cranked the volume, letting the reggaetón beat leak out like a stubborn argument.

Tyrel rolled his eyes. “This is why I keep headphones and a backup plan.”

Bharath lay back on his bunk, staring up at the ceiling tiles. The dorm room smelled faintly of disappointment.

Still... it was kind of comforting.

Sure, everything in America was louder, saltier, and vaguely judgmental - from the gravy to the music to the girls who’d already started ignoring him - but at least he had backup.

And that, for now, was enough.

Afternoon sun filtered in through the half-closed blinds, warming the dorm room into a hazy lull. Jorge was lying flat on the floor, flipping through the thick Georgia Tech orientation packet, while Bharath sat cross-legged on his bed, skimming through a separate stack of campus literature.

“Why do all these clubs have names like... Delta Psi Zeta?” Jorge asked, his finger tracing a flyer that featured glossy photos of smiling guys in polo shirts.

Bharath held up another page. “And look at this - Sigma Chi, Beta Theta Pi, Alpha... something. They all sound like equations.”

“Greek letters,” Jorge said.

“Yeah, but why Greek? This is the US.”

Jorge shrugged. “Maybe the Romans were busy?”

Bharath snorted.

Just then, Tyrel walked in, towel slung around his neck, earbuds dangling from his collar. He spotted the flyers spread across the floor and raised an eyebrow.

“What’s this?” he asked, flopping down on his bed.

“We’re trying to figure out what these *fraternities* are,” Jorge said.

“Yeah,” Bharath added. “Everyone keeps talking about ‘rush week’ like it’s the second coming. Should we go?”

Tyrel barked a laugh. “Oh hell no.”

Bharath looked up. “Why not?”

“Okay, lemme break it down for you,” Tyrel said, sitting up and cracking his knuckles. “Frats are like... clubs. But with way more alcohol, hazing, and entitlement. You pay dues to basically live in a house with a bunch of dudes who dress like they sell life insurance at 19.”

“Dues?” Jorge asked.

“Yeah. *Expensive* dues. Like hundreds, sometimes thousands of dollars a semester. You’re basically paying to get bullied, party a lot, and call each other ‘bro’ while wearing matching hoodies.”

Bharath frowned. “So why are people excited about it?”

“Because people are sheep,” Tyrel said flatly. “And because they think it gives them status. Connections. Some of these frats are old money - generational. If your dad was in it, you get legacy preference. Some of them are chill, but most just pretend to be the cast of Animal House.”

“So what’s rush week?” Jorge asked.

“That’s when all the frats open their doors and try to impress the new guys. They throw parties, give you free food, play beer pong, and then decide if you’re cool enough to join their little cult.”

“Sounds... very weird,” Bharath said.

Tyrel grinned. “Weird? Bruh, some of these kids get paddled in secret rooms, wear diapers, clean toilets blindfolded, and call it ‘tradition.’ One guy had to dress as a chicken and cluck around campus all day while holding a sign that said ‘My cock is loyal to Sigma.’”

Bharath’s mouth opened slightly. “That’s... legal?”

“It’s tradition,” Tyrel said. “And in America, tradition is the loophole.”

“Should we go?” Jorge asked. “Like, just to see?”

Tyrel scratched his chin. “We ain’t pledging, unless you’ve got a trust fund stashed in that floppy disk pouch. But...”

He paused, grinning. “...some of these frats got bad babes. Like cheerleaders, sorority girls, the whole shebang. So yeah, we can go to a couple parties. Dance a little. Pull some bitches. And then bounce.”

“Pull some - ” Bharath started, then blinked. “Is that... slang?”

“Ya, dawg. It means flirt. Seduce. Get digits. You’re in the US of A now, gotta update your vocabulary.”

“I just learned ‘what’s up’”

Tyrel clapped him on the back. “Then you’re ready.”

He grabbed one of the flyers and scanned it. “This one here - Alpha Tau Omega - they usually throw a decent bash. But I’ll ask around. Once I find out which frat got the baddest babes this week, I’ll let y’all know.”

Bharath exchanged a glance with Jorge. It was hard to tell whether Tyrel was a prophet or a parody.

Still, a part of him - the part that still believed in American movies and bedroom-in-the-sky fantasies - perked up at the thought.

Maybe it was worth checking out.

If nothing else, it would make a good story.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 8: Cultural Crossroads

[1,913 words]

Tyrel had left earlier with vague promises of “hitting the gym and scouting frat recon,” which apparently meant lifting a dumbbell once and flirting with two girls named Brittany. That left Jorge and Bharath alone, the first quiet moment of the day.

Jorge sat cross-legged on his bed, tying the laces on his sneakers with mechanical focus. Across the room, Bharath was standing at his tiny wardrobe, trying in vain to flatten out the creases from his one “semi-formal” shirt - a sky-blue short-sleeve with a button collar that looked like it had fought valiantly in the suitcase wars.

“So,” Bharath asked, glancing back, “you’re Korean... but also Bolivian?”

“Technically, yeah,” Jorge said, not looking up. “My grandparents were born in Busan. Then moved to La Paz a couple generations ago. I was born there. Spanish is my first language. My Korean’s... eh. I don’t even like kimchi unless it’s my halmeoni’s recipe.”

“Your what?”

“Grandma. She’s the only one who still talks about Korea like it’s home. Everyone else is just... Bolivian now. We eat rice with everything, but my mom also makes killer empanadas.”

Bharath grinned, folding his shirt with theatrical precision. “So you’re the only Korean I’ve met who’s never actually been to Korea?”

Jorge laughed. “Yup. I’m a fake Korean. And trust me - the Korean kids here will definitely remind me.”

“Same,” Bharath muttered, flopping onto his bunk with a huff. “I’m a full-on Indian boy - Tamil, raised in Chennai, grew up on Carnatic music and cricket - but we have issues between the different states in India as well. India is more like a continent than just one country. Apparently, the Indian people came here before us think we are different as well.”

Jorge leaned back against the wall. “You mean that mean girl clique? Yeah, I saw it. Those two girls at breakfast? Brutal.”

Bharath sat up, his expression guarded.

Jorge added, “Look, I don’t know what her deal is, but that was some class-A snobbery. And that pretty girl just sitting there? Not cool.”

Bharath shrugged, but it was the kind that tried too hard to be casual. “I guess I thought she was different.”

“They’re not worth your time,” Jorge said firmly. “You say one sentence with an accent and they act like they’ve never heard someone pronounce ‘schedule’ properly.”

There was a silence. A companionable one.

Then Jorge said, “You know... we both talk about our families a lot.”

Bharath looked over. “Is that a bad thing?”

“No. I think it means we actually *like* where we came from. My mom still calls me twice a day. Thinks I’m gonna get scurvy or something without her cooking.”

Bharath chuckled. “My amma packed a whole stash of snacks. Homemade murukku. Like a covert operation in my luggage.”

Jorge grinned. “My halmeoni snuck chili paste packets in mine. She thinks American food is poison.”

They both paused. Then broke into matching grins.

Despite the languages, continents, and cultures, the threads were there - food as love, parents as lifelines, relatives with unsolicited opinions, and that quiet ache of home wrapped in tinfoil and bubble wrap.

“You know,” Bharath said, stretching, “I used to think South Americans were all about football and samba. Like that Lambada song”

“That’s Brazilian hermano. But I understand. I used to think Indians meditated under waterfalls and ate only spice,” Jorge said.

“We do.”

They laughed.

By 5:30 p.m., both were dressed and ready - Jorge in a dark button-down and sneakers, Bharath in a lovely new shirt, hair combed within an inch of its life.

They stood outside Smith Hall, waiting at the foot of the stairs, the sky above now painted in soft peach and lavender.

The walk to the Student Center wasn't long, but to Bharath, it felt like stepping into a new test. One he wasn't sure he was ready for - not academically, but socially. Personally.

He looked at Jorge, who was fiddling with his digital watch like it was a Rubik's Cube.

“You ready?”

Jorge smiled. “Let's roll.”

Side by side, they walked into the golden light, heading toward the low thrum of music, the chatter of unfamiliar voices, and the first real chapter of their American life.

The International Student Orientation was... surprisingly nice.

Sure, the room was packed. And yes, once again, it was at least three-fourths men. The buzz of thick accents bouncing off the cafeteria walls sounded like a sonic map of the globe - Chinese, Arabic, Spanish, Russian, Hindi, Tagalog - and the occasional desperate attempt at humor from an overworked graduate student hosting the evening.

But somehow, Bharath found himself easing into it.

The abundance of Indian students meant that he didn't feel like an alien. If anything, it was a miniature India inside the student center - boys from Mumbai talking cricket scores, a few girls from Hyderabad already whispering in Telugu, someone from Coimbatore handing out banana chips like business cards.

Jorge, though, looked less certain.

He lingered close to Bharath, shoulders stiff, eyes scanning the room like he wasn't sure where to land.

Bharath nudged him gently. “Hey. Stick with me.”

Jorge managed a grateful half-smile.

When they were asked to form small groups for an icebreaker game called '*Cultural Criss-Cross*', Bharath made sure Jorge was always within arm's reach. When introductions came around, he spoke up quickly.

"This is Jorge," he said, patting his friend on the back. "He's from Bolivia. And yes, it's pronounced *Hor-hay*. In Spanish, 'J' becomes 'H' - don't ask why."

That line, repeated three times through the night, always got a laugh. It helped. Jorge warmed up.

Even Ravi - who found them by the refreshment table, sipping from a paper cup of mango juice - picked up the rhythm easily.

"Dude," Ravi said after being introduced. "You have to teach me Spanish curse words. For science."

Jorge grinned. "Deal."

The three of them sat together through the rest of the orientation, making sarcastic comments during the "diversity pledge" video and rating the snacks provided by the catering team ("Too American," "Too potato," "Still better than pizza").

But not everything was easy.

At one point, Jorge wandered over to a group of Korean students seated near the wall - drawn perhaps by some vague idea of cultural kinship. Bharath watched from across the room.

It didn't go well.

He saw the nods, the polite smiles, and then the slow disconnection. Someone asked Jorge something in Korean - probably basic - and Jorge shook his head. Another student frowned. Someone laughed lightly. One girl said something softly that made Jorge's ears turn red.

He came back five minutes later, quieter.

"They didn't really vibe?" Ravi asked under his breath.

"They wanted me to say something in Korean," Jorge muttered. "I told them I didn't speak it. One guy looked at me like I said I hated my ancestors."

Bharath winced. "Screw them. You're Bolivian. Korean by face, maybe. But culture is family."

"I don't even use chopsticks," Jorge said, trying to laugh.

“Neither do I,” Bharath said. “Unless it’s for instant noodles. Or poking holes in Tetra Pak juice boxes.”

Jorge looked between them and smiled, sheepish but steady.

Then he stood.

“Screw it. I’m becoming *desi* tonight.”

Ravi held up a finger. “Only if you agree that paneer is better than tofu.”

“I don’t know what paneer is,” Jorge said.

“You will.”

As the orientation ended, the three of them walked out together into the cooling Atlanta evening, flyers in hand and samosa crumbs in their pockets. The Indian Students’ Association meeting was just next door in the campus multipurpose hall, already pulsing with Bollywood music and the unmistakable scent of cumin and curry leaves.

Bharath looked around at the crowd.

He was still figuring out who he was in this new place. Still adjusting to accents, codes, rituals he hadn’t expected.

The multipurpose hall at the Georgia Tech student center was *packed*.

Bharath had expected a roomful of Indian students, sure - maybe fifty, tops. A couple of kids from Gujarat, a few from Tamil Nadu, a smattering of US-born desis looking mildly embarrassed at being dragged to a “cultural” event.

What he had *not* expected was this.

A sea of brown.

There had to be at least two hundred people, maybe more. Loud laughter, bright kurtas, faded jeans, jangling bangles, Timberlands and juttis, bindis and baseball caps, all coexisting in what looked like a festive desi street fair had been airlifted into a university building.

The smell of samosas, ketchup, and talcum powder filled the air. Bollywood music blared from cheap speakers. Someone was already dancing in a corner. Someone else was adjusting the mic stand for a welcome speech.

Jorge stopped dead in his tracks.

“Dios mío. Is there anyone *not* Indian in this room?”

Ravi grinned. “You, buddy.”

Bharath chuckled, already feeling that familiar weird warmth of seeing *his people* en masse in a foreign land.

Jorge added, “There’s so many of you! You should’ve told me this was your secret headquarters.”

Bharath and Ravi exchanged a glance.

Then both of them punched him on either shoulder.

“Welcome to the mothership,” Bharath said with a grin.

But the longer they stood there, the more Bharath began to notice... things.

Groups. Clusters. Cliques.

Not based on region - or not entirely - but something more nebulous. A strange social ecosystem.

The U.S.-born desi kids in their hoodies and sneakers stuck together, tossing around slang like “yo” and “real talk.” The well-dressed FOBs - mostly from Delhi, Bangalore, and Bombay - were gathered near the center, speaking a blend of accented English and regional phrases, confidently holding court. The South Indian kids were slightly more reserved, hovering near the food table. And then there were the studious types in the corner, clutching their plates like shields, watching everything silently.

Even here - even among *his own* - Bharath felt like a bit of an outsider.

“I’ve never seen this at home,” Ravi muttered, echoing his thoughts. “Everyone’s in *groups*.”

“And no one talks to strangers,” Jorge added, biting into a samosa. “This is like a high school cafeteria on steroids.”

Bharath nodded slowly.

Then his eyes landed on her again.

Ayesha

Even though he knew by now that she was not worth it, it didn’t stop his heart from skipping once as it flipped, and thudded against his ribs.

She stood near the center of the hall, laughing at something one of the guys beside her said. Her hair was braided over one shoulder, and she wore a deep green kurti with a matching dupatta thrown over her jeans. The outfit was simple - but on her, it looked radiant.

She looked confident. Effortless. Electric.

And utterly *untouchable*.

She and that rude girl from earlier were surrounded - not just by guys, though there were plenty of those - but also by other girls. Most of them were clearly upperclassmen, judging by the way they laughed a little louder, stood a little straighter, and surveyed the crowd like they were used to being admired.

She still looked perfectly judgmental.

Ravi elbowed him. "Oh no. You're looking at her again."

Jorge leaned in. "Is this the girl who waved at you across the dining hall?"

"The same," Bharath said quietly.

"She's... wow," Ravi admitted.

"I get it now," Jorge added, popping the rest of the samosa in his mouth. "Yeah, man. She's... like a Nescafé ad come to life."

"More like *Kaajal* ad," Ravi countered.

They both looked at Bharath.

"You dead?" Jorge asked.

"Internally, yes," Bharath said.

He gathered his courage. Took a step forward.

Ayesha caught his eye from across the room.

For a brief second - something passed between them. Recognition. Memory. Maybe even curiosity.

He raised his hand, halfway to a wave.

But then - she turned.

Pointedly.

Without a word.

Without a smile.

Just pivoted back to her group as though she hadn't seen him at all.

He stood frozen for a second, his hand awkwardly mid-air, then dropped it to his side.

Ravi winced. "Oof."

Jorge made a face. "Cold."

Bharath didn't say anything.

He didn't need to.

His silence said everything.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 9: First night reflections

[3,015 words]

The student center was still buzzing when they came back after the Indian Students' Association meet.

Ravi was wiping oil off his fingers from the last samosa, and Jorge had that look of possibility on his face again - the same one he'd had when he heard the first bars of salsa echoing through the student center hallway earlier.

"Listen," Jorge said, pausing near the glass doors of another room. "That's Latin music."

"I don't recognize it," Bharath admitted.

"You wouldn't," Jorge grinned. "That's salsa. Maybe a bit of cumbia. That's *my* world."

Above the door, a wide banner read in bold letters:

¡Bienvenidos a Todos! Hispanic Student Association – Welcome Social

People flowed in and out casually, greeting one another with cheek kisses, fist bumps, and easy, uninhibited laughter. The scent of lime, tamarind, and warm pastries drifted through the air.

Jorge practically vibrated with joy.

Ravi looked uncertain. “Are we crashing?”

“They said *all* are welcome,” Jorge said. “And after I spent an hour being surrounded by samosas and slang I didn’t understand? You guys owe me.”

“Fair enough,” Bharath said with a tired smile. “Let’s go.”

The room was alive - dimly lit, thrumming with low bass and bursts of laughter. A DJ booth at the far end was blasting a reggaetón remix, and a circle of students danced near the speakers, hips moving like they had their own sentience. The scent of fried snacks and body spray lingered in the air. Samosas and Sprite never felt so exotic.

There were more girls here. More smiles. More skin.

Ravi scanned the crowd and let out a dramatic sigh. “Wow. They *do* exist.”

Bharath raised an eyebrow. “Did we just discover the mythical female engineering majors?”

“I doubt they are all engineering majors”, said Jorge confidently.

“Only a 3 is to 1 ratio here,” Ravi whispered in awe. “This must be what heaven feels like.”

They gravitated toward the wall like magnetic filings, sticking close, not quite ready to wade into the social chaos. They stood in a small, unspoken triangle - Bharath, Ravi, and Jorge - three brown penguins in a room full of confident gazelles.

But Jorge was already starting to move.

He caught sight of a familiar rhythm, a familiar cadence. Spanish. Across the room, a group of Latino students stood chatting animatedly by the soda cooler, and without missing a beat, Jorge drifted toward them like a fish returning to familiar waters.

Bharath watched him go, mildly impressed.

“He really does walk like he belongs,” Bharath murmured.

Ravi popped some kind of fried plantain in his mouth. "Must be nice to have a native tongue in common with so many other countries. So many more options in terms of people to speak with."

"Mine's Tamil," Bharath said dryly. "This is my fourth language. Maybe sixth if you count C or Java."

Ravi grinned. "Respect."

But ten minutes later, Jorge reappeared - not swaggering, but subdued. Drink in hand, brow furrowed, like someone who'd just walked into the wrong wedding and tried to pretend it was their cousin's.

"They thought I was Korean-American," Jorge said as he approached.

Bharath blinked. "You're literally wearing a Bolivia flag pin."

"I know! I even spoke Spanish - fluent Spanish. They just nodded politely like I was doing a cute party trick."

"They didn't believe you?" Ravi asked.

"Oh, they believed me *eventually*. But then came the second test."

"Second test?" Bharath asked.

"They asked me who my favorite Latin artists were," Jorge said with a sigh. "So I said Selena and Daddy Yankee. You know. Safe classics."

Ravi visibly winced. "Is that bad?"

"I don't know the cultural equivalent to compare", shrugged Jorge. "Yeah it's bad".

"And then one girl laughed when I said my mom makes kimchi empanadas. She literally said - *'Wait, so you're like Korean with seasoning?'*"

Ravi choked on his soda. "She *did not*."

"She did," Jorge confirmed, deadpan. "They called me 'Bolikorean.' I don't think I've been insulted like that in real life."

Bharath offered him a drink from the table in solemn silence. Jorge took it like a soldier being handed a medal after a lost battle.

"So... not the warm welcome you were expecting," Ravi said.

"I thought I'd finally feel like I fit somewhere," Jorge muttered. "Turns out, even here, there's a pecking order. You're not from the right country. You don't dance the right way. Your grandparents came from the wrong coast."

Bharath leaned back against the wall. "You know, when I got called a FOB earlier today, I thought I'd peaked in humiliation."

"I got laughed at for listening to the Backstreet Boys," Ravi added helpfully.

"I *like* the Backstreet Boys!" Bharath said.

They all paused.

Then burst into laughter - the kind that starts as a chuckle and builds into something belly-deep and breathless.

It drew a few glances from across the room, but none of them cared. For the first time that evening, they didn't feel out of place. Not because the crowd had accepted them - but because *they* had.

Jorge exhaled and looked at his half-empty cup. "You know what? Tonight I'm not Korean. Or Bolivian. Or even 'Bolikorean.' I'm just a guy with great hair and decent rhythm."

"Hell yeah," Ravi said, raising his soda can.

Bharath grinned. "To surviving elitist desis and judgmental Latinos."

"To cultural orphans," Jorge said.

"To the brown boy alliance," Ravi added.

They clinked cups and cans together with the solemnity of a sacred pact, laughing over their shared misadventures and mutual misfit status. For a fleeting moment, the world felt smaller - less intimidating. They weren't from the right cities, didn't say the right names, didn't wear the right shoes. But they had each other. And that, for tonight, was enough.

Bharath leaned back, soda can pressed against his palm, letting the music thump through his chest as his eyes drifted lazily across the room - not searching for anything in particular. Just observing.

And that's when he saw her.

She stood by one of the folding tables near the back, half-shadowed by a pillar, arms crossed, hips tilted, one foot tapping absently to the beat. A vision in tight, high-waisted

jeans and a cropped white top that clung to her body like it was designed by divine intervention. Her flawless caramel skin glowed under the warm yellow lights, catching the eye like the sun on still water. Her hair spilled in long, effortless waves down her back, and when she brushed it away from her face, the silver ring on her finger flashed like punctuation.

Bharath's breath caught.

Not because he meant to stare - but because his brain stopped working for a second.

She looked like someone pulled out of a music video and dropped into this hall by mistake. Someone you see from across the room and convince yourself must be famous. Someone who doesn't just exist in the same timeline as you - until she does.

And then, somehow, impossibly - she turned.

Their eyes met.

Her expression shifted instantly - a flicker of recognition? Disapproval? Amusement?

Bharath couldn't tell.

But she had definitely seen him.

And then... she took a step forward.

Her face hardened instantly.

Bharath blinked.

Another step.

Then a voice - low, sharp, fast, and furious - burst out of her.

“¿Qué carajos te pasa? ¿Por qué me miras así, idiota?”

Bharath stiffened.

He hadn't understood a *word*, but the tone was unmistakable.

Anger. Real anger.

The girl was glaring at him like he'd insulted her ancestors. Her hands were up now, gesturing furiously.

“I - I'm sorry,” Bharath stammered. “I didn't mean - I wasn't - ”

But she was already talking over him, faster, louder.

“¿Qué, crees que soy una especie de espectáculo para ti? ¿Te divierte mirar fijamente a las chicas como si no tuvieran cerebro?”

“I don't - I don't understand - ”

“What's wrong with you? Can't speak? No hablas español, pero tienes ojos, no?”

Ravi had quietly disappeared.

Bharath was frozen. His mouth opened but no sound came out.

Every eye nearby had turned toward them - the DJ's track still playing, but somehow quieter now, muffled by the tension thickening around him.

And just when it felt like things couldn't get worse -

“¡Whoa, tranquila! Hey!”

Jorge slipped into the space between them like a matador sent by fate, hands raised in an open, calming gesture.

The girl turned sharply. “Qué?”

“He's not trying to be a creep, okay? Chill.” Jorge's voice was steady but respectful.

“He's new. Like *really* new. First time in America. He doesn't even speak Spanish. He didn't mean to stare. He just doesn't know how to handle people like you yet.”

“People like me?” she repeated, eyebrow arching.

Jorge caught himself. “I meant - you're beautiful. Striking. I mean, if I didn't know better, I'd stare too. He's just... overwhelmed.”

The girl narrowed her eyes, but her stance softened a little.

“You're defending your boy?” she asked, switching effortlessly into clear English.

“Yes. Because I've lived with him for two days and he's the most clueless, genuine human I've met. He probably thinks 'spicy Latina' is a food category.”

Bharath managed a strangled sound that might've been a chuckle.

The girl exhaled slowly, running a hand through her long hair.

"I thought he was Latino," she said, the anger draining from her voice. "Looked brown. Just assumed he was another wannabe with a soft voice and a hard-on."

Jorge turned to Bharath and gestured. "Dude, introduce yourself."

Bharath swallowed and stepped forward.

"I'm Bharath," he said. "From Chennai, in India. And... I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I genuinely didn't understand what you were saying. I didn't mean to stare. It's just been a long day, and I got caught up. You're... well... kind of hard not to notice."

The girl studied him.

Her expression was unreadable for a moment - but then her mouth twitched. A smile, subtle and reluctant.

"Okay," she said. "That was actually kind of sweet."

She extended her hand. "Marisol. Cuban-American. Born and raised in Marietta."

Bharath took her hand - warm, strong, a firm shake.

"Nice to meet you, Marisol."

Jorge grinned and clapped Bharath's shoulder. "And I'm Jorge. Korean-Bolivian. La Paz via Seoul. Kind of a one-man U.N."

"Wow," she said, eyebrows lifting. "You guys are like a walking diversity brochure."

"We try," Jorge said.

Marisol looked at Bharath again. "I really did think you were another Latin guy pretending not to speak Spanish so he could pull the 'Oh no, teach me your language' crap."

"That's... a thing?"

"It's *a/ways* a thing," she said with a groan. "These guys walk up like they've never seen a woman before and assume because they go to Tech now, I should just fall at their feet. It's exhausting."

Jorge nodded in understanding. "Latino dudes here are on extra-kringe mode. They think an Engineering major makes them irresistible."

“God, yes,” Marisol said, exasperated. “As if being able to pass a data structures quiz means I owe them a night out.”

Bharath grinned. “For what it’s worth, I’m not trying to get into your pants. I don’t think I’d fit in them.”

Marisol blinked, then burst out laughing.

“That’s the most honest thing I’ve heard tonight.”

He smiled, slightly embarrassed. “I’m just trying to survive orientation week.”

“Same,” she said. “I’m a freshman too.”

“You’re kidding,” Jorge said. “You’ve got upperclass energy.”

“Yeah, well,” she said, brushing her hair back, “it’s called having to grow up fast. I live with my mom and my sister - single-parent household, tight money, lots of expectations. I’ve been fighting off creeps since I was fourteen. By the time I got here, I thought I’d finally find some chill.”

She shook her head.

“But the guys here? Same energy. Just... now with access to resume templates.”

Bharath laughed. “That sounds... horrifying.”

Marisol chuckled. “It is. You’re lucky. You’ve still got that innocence.”

Bharath shrugged. “Maybe it’s just jet lag.”

“Maybe you’re just decent,” she said, eyeing him more softly now.

A quiet moment passed. The music had picked up again. Someone near the corner started dancing. A tray of mini churros was being passed around.

Then Marisol cocked her head. “So what’re you guys studying?”

“Computer Science,” Bharath said.

“Same,” Jorge added.

“No way,” she said. “Me too.”

Bharath blinked. “Really?”

“Yep. I got placed into the CS 1331 section at 10 a.m. on Mondays.”

“That’s mine too,” Jorge said.

“Same here!” Bharath added.

They all looked at each other.

“Well,” Jorge said. “Looks like fate wants us to debug Java together.”

Marisol laughed. “As long as no one tries to hit on me over group projects, I’m good.”

Just then, Ravi reappeared, holding two napkins with something fried inside.

“Oh thank God,” he said. “You’re still alive.”

“Ravi,” Bharath said. “Meet Marisol.”

Ravi’s mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. “Hi.”

“Hi,” she said, half-amused.

Jorge added, “She already yelled at Bharath. We’re past introductions.”

“She what?”

“It’s fine,” Bharath said quickly. “I deserved it.”

“You really didn’t,” Marisol said. “But apology accepted.”

They stood together for a bit, talking about classes, dorm food, and the impossibility of getting into any CS elective without waking up at dawn during course registration.

Ravi warmed up slowly. Marisol’s beauty and presence had a way of demanding respect, not performance. She wasn’t trying to impress anyone. She didn’t care for social maneuvering.

That, in itself, was oddly attractive.

Bharath noticed something too - she talked with her whole face. Her eyebrows arched when she made a point. Her nose crinkled when she laughed. Her hands punctuated everything. It was like watching a symphony of gestures.

He liked that she wasn’t trying to be sweet.

She was just... *herself*.

As the evening wore on and the crowd thinned, someone handed Bharath a small flan on a plastic plate. Jorge got a guava soda. Marisol sipped on horchata through a red straw.

Ravi turned to Bharath. "You okay?"

"Yeah," he said, looking at Marisol from the corner of his eye. "Better than okay."

Marisol glanced at him. "You still staring?"

He flushed. "Sorry - "

She smiled. "Relax. You're cute when you panic."

Jorge nearly choked on his soda.

By the time they said their goodbyes and stepped out into the night air, the stars were sharper overhead. The walk back to Smith and Cloudman felt easier. Like the world was beginning to crack open in unexpected, messy, beautiful ways.

As they reached the dorm steps, Marisol said, "See you Monday morning, CS 1331."

"Definitely," Bharath said.

She looked at him a second longer than necessary.

"Don't be a stranger."

Then she turned and walked away, her braid swaying, her silhouette lit by the amber glow of the campus lights.

By the time Bharath and Jorge trudged back to Smith Hall, the dorm had quietened into that post-orientation haze - not asleep, but definitely winding down. Somewhere down the hall, a door slammed. Someone's portable speaker thumped out faint R&B. The hallway smelled like microwaved noodles.

They pushed open the door to Room 202 and found Tyrel sprawled across his bunk, propped up on one elbow, watching a flickering TV across from his bed.

On screen: a brightly colored living room, a guy in neon clothes dancing dramatically.

Tyrel didn't look away. "Y'all survive your cultural field trips?"

"Barely," Jorge muttered, dropping his bag onto his chair. "Bharath nearly got murdered," he said with a smirk. "He's famous now."

Tyrel looked over his shoulder, raising an eyebrow. "Damn. What happened?"

"Long story," Bharath said, rubbing the back of his neck. "But I made a friend."

Tyrel grinned. "You got a number?"

"No."

"Then you made a lesson."

Jorge chuckled and flopped down on his bed. "What are you watching?"

"Fresh Prince of Bel-Air," Tyrel said. "Classic."

"I love this show," Jorge said immediately, eyes lighting up. "They dubbed this in Bolivia. I used to watch it with my cousins. You know the *Carlton Dance*?"

Tyrel smirked. "Do I know the Carlton - boy, I *invented* the Carlton."

He hopped up, mimicked the goofy sway-and-snap move from the show, and sat back down laughing.

Bharath stared at the screen, bewildered. "What is this? Is that... Will Smith?"

Jorge gasped. "You've never seen the Fresh *Prince*?"

Bharath shook his head. "Should I have?"

Tyrel threw a pillow at him. "Yes. Yes, you should have."

"It never aired in India!"

"It's a rite of passage, mi hermano," Jorge said, scooting forward. "Trust me - it's got everything. Funny uncles, dumb cousins, rich vs. poor, identity issues, friendship. You'll love it."

Tyrel pointed at the screen. "This episode right here - Will gets stuck in a jail cell on vacation because Carlton tries to play gangster. Gold."

Bharath sat cross-legged on his bunk, watching cautiously as Will Smith broke the fourth wall with a raised eyebrow and exaggerated shrug.

Okay... it was funny.

As the show ran, the boys slowly unwound. Tyrel peeled off his socks. Jorge stretched until his spine popped. Bharath massaged his sore shoulder, thinking back to Marisol's eyes and the way she'd said *Don't be a stranger*.

Eventually, Jorge stood up and grabbed his towel. "I'm setting an alarm for 4 a.m."

"For what?" Bharath asked.

"To shower. No chance I'm walking in there naked with five dudes lined up again."

Bharath nodded immediately. "Set mine too."

"You two scheduling your nudity now?" Tyrel grinned.

Jorge ignored him. "You coming to the gym tomorrow?"

Bharath blinked. "You're going?"

"Hell yeah," Jorge said. "We're scrawny. Well I am... you are decent... but you may want to build some muscle if you want to survive those showers with dignity?"

Bharath groaned. "You're right. Fine. Gym. Tomorrow."

"Five-thirty," Jorge said. "No backing out."

Tyrel snorted. "Y'all are wild."

Jorge pointed at him. "You got abs. You don't get to talk."

"True."

As they settled into bed, lights dimmed and the familiar hum of the dorm returned - distant footsteps, soft conversation, an occasional door creak.

Bharath lay in bed, watching the ceiling fan spin in lazy circles.

He had survived. His first full day in America.

He had been yelled at, laughed at, ignored, surprised, overwhelmed.

He'd eaten cereal that looked and tasted like plastic. Met the most beautiful girl in his life and was promptly forgotten. Met another beautiful girl, got yelled at, and somehow made her laugh.

And now, he had new friends, an awkward shower plan, a gym resolution, and a TV show about a guy from West Philly living in Bel Air. It wasn't the America he had imagined.

But maybe that was okay.

He closed his eyes, the ceiling fan's lazy whirl lulling him toward sleep. Tomorrow brought the real unknown: actual classes. CS 1331 at 10 a.m. It was the same lecture hall where Marisol would be sitting just a few rows away, probably looking effortlessly cool while he tried not to panic over the syllabus.

Would she remember him as the clueless guy who stared too long? Or worse, forget him entirely?

And what about the gym at 5:30? He pictured himself fumbling with weights while Tyrel laughed and Jorge spotting him like a protective older brother.

Whatever it was, maybe America was finally starting to feel like the adventure he'd hoped for.

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Chapter 10: Gym Day Beginnings

[1,304 words]

The alarm buzzed at 5:30 a.m.

Bharath groaned.

Jorge didn't even pretend to get up right away. "Five more minutes," he mumbled, face buried in his pillow.

"No," Bharath said, swinging his legs over the edge of the bunk. "You said we'd go. You made me promise."

"I hate past me," Jorge groaned.

But ten minutes later, they were walking through the dewy morning toward the Georgia Tech Student Athletic Complex, water bottles in hand and gym bags slung over tired shoulders.

What greeted them made them both stop in their tracks.

“Holy... shit,” Jorge whispered.

The gym was magnificent.

High ceilings. Massive open floors. Rows and rows of gleaming machines. Dumbbells were arranged like modern art. Floor-to-ceiling mirrors. Even the flooring smelled new - a mix of rubber, lemon-scented disinfectant, and ambition.

And the people.

Men with sculpted arms. Women with abs sharp enough to cut glass. Sweat glistening like it had been hand-painted by lighting assistants.

“Are they... students?” Bharath asked.

“Or superhero cast rejects,” Jorge muttered.

A friendly-looking trainer in a Georgia Tech shirt noticed them hovering near the bench press stations and approached.

“New here?” he asked.

They both nodded.

“Alright. We’ve got beginner programs for you. First step - what are your goals?”

Bharath hesitated. “I want to tone. Condition. Maybe build a little muscle.”

“Same,” Jorge added. “Except... a lot of muscle.”

The trainer smiled. “Great. I’ll get you started on a split routine. Push-pull-legs format. Three days a week. Compound lifts. You’ll learn the form. Rest and recovery are just as important.”

They both nodded, though Bharath wasn’t entirely sure what a “compound lift” was. Still, it felt good to be taken seriously.

After a brief orientation and a few laughably clumsy attempts at squats, lat pulldowns, and assisted push-ups, their session ended with protein bar samples and a promise to return Wednesday.

They headed to the communal showers, muscles already sore.

Bharath opened the door and sighed. "No curtains. Again. Don't people ever want to bathe alone in this country?"

"America," Jorge said dramatically, untying his towel. "Land of the free. Home of the shower shame."

A quick scan of the room only deepened their discomfort.

The men here were jacked.

Big shoulders. Veins on arms. Towel-snapping confidence.

Bharath sighed. "Back to the gym tomorrow."

"Absolutely," Jorge agreed.

After the quickest rinse of their lives, they returned to Smith Hall to drop off their bags, now fully awake and already ravenous.

The dining hall wasn't any more appealing than it had been yesterday.

Scrambled eggs that looked bleached. Bacon floating in grease. Something called hash browns that squeaked when bitten into - like an aloo tikki, only inedible. Again, the cereal bins ruled over the breakfast zone like sugary tyrants.

Ravi waved them over, two slices of toast in hand and a bowl of Cheerios already half-eaten.

"Idhar bhai (Here bro)," he said, gesturing to a seat. "You're alive. Impressive."

Bharath sat down and pointed at the eggs. "We're going to die if we eat this every day."

"I can live off cereal," Ravi said. "Toast. Jam. Done."

"I want protein," Bharath muttered.

"Boiled eggs," Jorge said, stacking three onto a plate. "Let's hoard."

Bharath grabbed milk. Jorge grabbed more eggs. Ravi stuck to toast.

Then Bharath spotted a bottle of Tabasco at the condiment station and snatched it like a man who'd found water in the desert.

"I thought I saw this yesterday," he said, pouring a heavy stream over his eggs.

Ravi and Jorge followed suit.

Five minutes later, the three of them were downing the fire-spiked eggs with milk chasers, sniffing but smiling.

“This is it,” Jorge said. “Breakfast salvation.”

Tyrel walked past with a biscuit sandwich in hand and paused.

He stared at their plates.

“Are y’all trying to die?”

Ravi shrugged. “We’re just making this country’s food edible.”

Tyrel chuckled and sat down. “You guys are wild. That much hot sauce? Before 8 a.m.? You need Jesus.”

Just then, a burst of laughter erupted from a nearby table - sharp, deliberate, the kind of sound that was meant to be heard.

Bharath glanced over without meaning to.

There she was.

Ayesha.

Perched at the center of a table that looked like it had been airlifted out of a student fashion catalog - a circle of guys in fitted tees and perfect fades, girls in crop tops and platform sandals who radiated the kind of effortless cool that made everyone else feel like background noise. They looked like they’d been here forever - as if Georgia Tech had been waiting for them.

Ayesha, of course, looked incredible. High-waisted jeans, a black tank top, and hoop earrings that caught the light with every tilt of her head. But it wasn’t her outfit that made Bharath’s stomach twist.

It was the way she threw her head back laughing.

Like she had no memory of who he was. Like they hadn’t shared a cab ride from the airport just two days ago. Like she hadn’t leaned across the seat with that easy smile and conversation.

Now, one of the boys beside her leaned in and whispered something, half-covered behind his Red Bull can. Ayesha glanced in Bharath’s direction, didn’t even blink - then smirked and said, loudly enough for the whole corner of the room to hear:

“Some of these FOB guys look like they’ve never even *seen* scrambled eggs before. Look at that dweeb trying to drown his eggs in Tabasco.”

The table exploded with laughter.

And not the polite, nervous kind - the kind that stabbed.

Bharath froze.

The fork in his hand felt suddenly stupid. The scrambled eggs on his plate - too soft, too yellow, too foreign - looked like they were mocking him now.

He didn’t turn around. Didn’t rise to the bait. He just looked down, jaw tight.

The Tabasco he’d added earlier burned the back of his throat. But it wasn’t the same kind of heat now.

It was the kind that made your eyes sting.

To his left, Jorge went still. “Yo. That was - ”

“Uncalled for,” Ravi finished, mouth full of toast, his expression darkening.

Even Tyrel, who had just returned with a plate stacked like a Waffle House ad, paused and frowned. “What the hell’s her problem? She was all chill at the airport, wasn’t she?”

Bharath nodded, slowly. “We split a cab when we came to the airport at the same time. She seemed like a nice person then.”

“And now she’s trying out for some kind of telenovela villana?” Jorge asked, incredulous.

Tyrel shook his head. “Zara I get. That girl looks like she came out the womb judging people. But Ayesha? What’s her deal?”

Bharath picked up a piece of toast, then put it down. “Maybe... maybe I misread it. Maybe she was just being polite that day.”

“Dude,” Tyrel said, leaning forward. “If this is some twisted hazing thing, or her way of climbing the social ladder - screw that. That’s *her* insecurity, not yours.”

Bharath didn’t speak for a moment. He just stirred his eggs slowly, like they might give him answers.

“She changed,” he said finally. “Or maybe I just didn’t see it.”

“Or maybe,” Jorge said, “she’s surrounded by people who treat being cruel like a personality.”

“Classic case of ‘impress the cool kids by kicking down,’” Ravi added, rolling his eyes. “Oldest trick in the book.”

Tyrel narrowed his eyes in Ayesha’s direction. “Man... she looked at you like she didn’t know you. That ain’t just cold. That’s calculated.”

Bharath chuckled under his breath - not from humor, but disbelief. “And all this... over eggs.”

They all laughed - a little bitterly, but still together.

Then Jorge said, “You know what? Let her keep her cool-kid table. I’d rather sit here with the breakfast misfits.”

“To the FOB table,” Ravi said, raising his paper cup like a wine glass.

“To scrambled eggs and biscuit diplomacy,” Tyrel added, clinking his syrup bottle against it.

Bharath smiled despite himself.

It still hurt. It still stung. But the sharpest edge of it had been dulled - not because it didn’t matter, but because he wasn’t alone in it.

He had friends now. Brothers in awkward assimilation. Survivors of cafeteria injustice and social warfare.

And together?

They’d figure this place out.

Even if it meant building their own table from scratch.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

