

THEIR WONDER YEARS: FALL 98

Chapter 3: The Long Haul

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 kurti 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 cricketing 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.