

THEIR WONDER YEARS: FALL 98

Chapter 4: Smith 202

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.