

THEIR WONDER YEARS: FALL 98

Chapter 5: First Morning Shock

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.