

# THEIR WONDER YEARS: FALL 98

## Chapter 6: Breakfast Betrayal

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.