

DAY SEVEN

He knew it would happen one day. But he had not reckoned with how soon it would be. At breakfast, dressed still in her peignoir, she faced him over the toast and juice. There was an ominous grimace on her face.

"Enjoyed the Chowdhury's party last night?" She asked archly.

"Hmm. It was okay."

"Only okay?" She raised her threaded eyebrows. "Didn't see the ice-sculpture, did you?"

"I did, waste of good money – if you ask me."

"Oh, that's a shame! Did you pay for it?"

"What's bugging you? Why are you so hell-bent on picking a fight early in the morning?" He burst out.

"I could say a million things. How you sat glumly in a corner. How you didn't stand up when I introduced my boss, how, when you caught my eye, you kept tapping your watch, I don't care for the slurping sounds when you have soup, your drooping moustache, your 'cheapo' presents on my birthdays, how you don't tip the waiters, not to speak of your less than inspiring efforts in bed."

"Let me write it down," he smiled sarcastically. "It's quite a list."

"List?" Her eyes blazed with rage. "You call it a list, a kind of grocery list? If only you understood the agony I am going through in this marriage."

"The children..."

"That's why I put them in boarding school. So they don't have to see this sham of a marriage."

"What do you want me to do? I can't change. I'm middle-aged. So are you."

"Don't you dare say that."

"Okay, that's it then. You despise me. I tolerate you. End of story."

She put her elbows on the table. "Not so fast. This time I am serious. You are a bore. A crashing bore, you get it? I get angry as soon as I see you. You have never done a single interesting thing in your life. I am giving you seven days. Seven days to prove you are interesting. To make me feel you are not a cardboard cut-out."

"I'll think about it."

"No, there's more. Pack a bag and stay at your friend Dhiren's house. Come back only when you manage to surprise me."

He called up Dhiren. "We'll have a blast. Which bar would you like?" Dhiren's tone was warm.

"It's different this time," Vivek said grimly. "My life is unravelling, buddy."

After work, Dhiren was waiting for him at his modest flat. The two men talked for three hours.

"Just leave her, Vivek. You don't have to prove anything after 20 years. To hell with her! Women are nothing but trouble."

"How can I be interesting, Dhiren? Wear a jazzy tie, grow sideburns, have an affair? Give up everything and become a monk? Write a bestseller?"

"Have another martini," said Dhiren.

Late at night, lying sleepless in Dhiren's stuffy guest room and staring at the ceiling, an idea came to him. It was like the light of a train coming through a tunnel.

Some hours later, he rang a number.

"Yes?" The voice was gruff, brooking no nonsense. "Who's speaking?"

Vivek introduced himself.

"I need a favour."

"Hurry up. I have no time."

Vivek spoke for ten minutes. His voice choked, he hyperventilated, he pleaded.

"Who told you I do such things?"

"A friend of mine got a tip. Can you do it in seven days?"

"What's the budget?"

He quoted a figure.

"Peanuts!"

"You say."

"Seven lakhs, for seven days."

"WhatsApp me the photo. Who is it?"

"I can't tell you."

Day one. Vivek took one week leave from office. He rang up his children in Kurseong. Tanya was doing a play on Parents' Day. Bobby had had a fight.

"Has Mummy called you?"

"Yes," said Tanya. "Why? Are you fighting again?"

"No, I promise you, in a week you will see us fighting no more."

Time hung heavy on his hands. He took a one-hour river cruise. The dolphins leaped. The river water surged behind the steamer. Egrets flew above the water. What was toxic drained out of him. During his college days there was the Reboti Chow haunt under a giant tree by the water tank at Pan Bazar. He sat on a stool by the shade, wolfing down a plate of noodles. He wandered along the footpaths, entering book shops. Then he saw a man looking at him from across the street. He hurried and lost himself in the crowd.

On day two, he saw the boy again, wearing a hoodie. There was another man in a motorcycle, engines revving.

On day four, the guttural voice called him.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I have already paid you."

"So, between six and seven?"

Strangely, fear now washed over him. What had he done? Did domestic squabbles lead to this strange game? Had he been reckless?

Early on the seventh day, he went jogging in the park. The grass was wet with dew. Blossoms nodded. A laughter club was going on. He came face to face with the man in the hoodie. There was a pop and he saw a crimson smear on his abdomen. He fell on his knees, shuddered and was still.

It was all over television. A middle level bank manager shot while jogging at a city park.

Mitali was watching the news – pale, shaken. He had made the ultimate gesture to prove he was not a bore. He had ensured his own death.

(LOVE BYTE) YESTERDAY'S LINES

The children are playing in the backyard beneath the clothes I hung out to dry. Their shrieks of delight, as they kick a ball, made me happy for a brief while. It is afternoon and lunch is ready. I see his back gate open and Romen let himself in. This bulky man with the dancer's walk. Abhi's friend and the children's Sunday uncle. He works in a rundown bookstore and comes for lunch every Sunday since Abhi and I got married and moved to their house. His hair is thinning, his face pitted with lines. When he is there, Abhi does not fight with me. We sit around playing cards, reading the papers. Sometimes I bake. When I am in the kitchen, I weep for the dreams that died, for the desire that evaporated like raindrops, the dry crackle of boredom like dead leaves underfoot.

Abhi is driving home from work. He badly needs a drink. He has had a gruelling four hours with spreadsheets. Anjali would not understand. That was a given. A tragic heroine folding tea towels. At college, she had been long-haired, luminous in her beauty, not letting him touch her till he groaned. Now she was flabby, her hair had coarsened, her mouth twisted with regret, unhappiness. What did the bitch want? The house, the kids, the appliances, carpets, food on the table – everything. But he had to be truthful. He did not desire her anymore. Her flesh repulsed him. He could not murmur endearments. Anjali was a woman he had loved, who did not exist anymore. The sad-eyed, sullen Anjali who slept by his side was a stranger who sought what he would not give. "This can't go on, bou."

"This marriage," he shrugs, spreading his hands helplessly, as if it were an ungainly creature he was trying to shoo out.

"What do you care?" she was bitter spiteful. "Just keep turning up every Sunday, for the kids."

"Is that what you think – that I come only for the kids?"

Her eyes widen.

"He was wonderful at college. Wrote me love letters that made me sleepless. So much poetry, adoration... the singing of the stars... the hills' blue sadness, my cardamom-scented mouth... this was Abhi, the stranger who will not let me touch him."

"I thought I would never tell you. I thought you would not know why I am single. I wrote those, Anjali. He paid me. I wrote them to make you happy. Every word is true."