

Buffalo Wings

Neena was a star student throughout her undergraduate work at the Engineering Institute. She had mastered the art of cracking exams, which means she got top grades in every course whether she enjoyed the subject or not. The fact that many courses, or the professors teaching them, were mindlessly boring didn't affect her performance. She graduated from her department with straight A's, and then she automatically applied to universities in the US for higher studies. All her classmates had done the same, although the reason for which she wished to pursue graduate studies in the US was quite different from theirs. It was almost fashionable for students in her reputable Institute to go to the US after collecting their undergraduate degrees. Nobody questioned the belief that that was the way to take the fast lane in their career paths.

Neena, on the other hand, couldn't care less for what the US universities had to offer for her career growth. In fact, career wasn't on her mind at all. Her reason was quite simple: her best friend Arundhati had already left for the US a year before, and Neena felt that it was only natural to go where Arundhati was. Arundhati was ahead of Neena by a year, and they had spent three fantastic years together in the girls' dormitory of their

college. In the highly competitive academic environment that was dominated by men – the girls to boys ratio was 1 to 5 – it was natural for girls to develop close bonds to ensure survival and sanity.

Soon after her arrival as a freshman at the Engineering Institute, Neena was drawn to Arundhati. While other senior girls at the dormitory had taken pleasure in tormenting the newcomer Neena with nasty personal questions (this harassment of newcomers was an annual ritual – a rite of passage – at the Institute), Arundhati had helped Neena with small things like finding storage for her extra luggage, and had introduced her to key members of the dormitory staff (upon whose kindness and cooperation her quality of life at the dorm largely depended). Neena's initial shock of being away from her parents' home for the first time in life was somewhat alleviated by Arundhati's sympathetic disposition. To the surprise of the other girls in the dormitory, Neena and Arundhati had become close friends in a short time. And there was indeed reason for their surprise.

Arundhati's mature and thoughtful ways contrasted with Neena's impulsive and reckless nature. Where Neena would lose her patience for the slightest disagreement and let her tongue loose on the dorm attendants (called *Mavashi*¹), Arundhati would approach the concerned Mavashi privately, and whisper some magic words that would make the defiant-looking Mavashi relax and smile. Neena liked to pick fights with other girls, boys, and even professors. Arundhati never resorted to angry outbursts; she was relied upon as the peacemaker when fights broke out anywhere in the girls' dormitory. Going by Nature's laws of attraction between opposites – which might be a possible explanation for their attraction – Neena and Arundhati were drawn to each other by the forces of their divergent natures. For

¹ *Mavashi* is a Marathi word which literally means Aunt (mother's sister). It commonly refers to any older woman.

Neena, the older and cool-headed Arundhati quickly became a friend, mentor, idol, and soul-mate. Neena followed her everywhere like a shadow. It also didn't matter that they were in different departments. Even on days when Arundhati went to meet her parents (who lived in the same city at an hour's ride by train), Neena phoned her to have long chats.

Arundhati, on one hand, was a sensitive and sympathetic person – she had an uncanny awareness of people's emotions. When girls sought her help to solve their problems, she responded eagerly and whole-heartedly. But, on the other hand, she also preferred to be left alone, to mind her own business when no one needed her help. She wasn't anti-social, but she rarely went around looking for company. Her response to Neena was similar: she responded enthusiastically to Neena's overtures and enjoyed being her mentor and companion. But she didn't quite reciprocate Neena's growing infatuation, her desire to stay in constant touch, and sometimes worried about it. Arundhati was rather reserved by nature, and she didn't like sharing all her time and thoughts with others, although Neena was one who demanded both relentlessly.

Fortunately, in spite of these personality differences, during all of their three years together, there never was any conflict between them. Over time, Arundhati grew warmer and closer towards Neena. They had the most exciting time of their lives at the Institute, and a big part of it was spent just with each other.

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Coming back to the present situation, Arundhati was now in Binghamton, New York, pursuing a Ph.D. at the State University. She had already spent a year in the US, and thus felt quite comfortable in her new surroundings. She had a graduate

research assistantship with a professor who was also her thesis advisor, and was sailing smoothly through the coursework. She had built a small, comfortable social circle of her own.

Neena did not have the money to pay for her higher studies. She could not get a scholarship or any other means of financial support at Binghamton. So, she selected SUNY Buffalo, partly because she got a partial tuition fee waiver and also because it was the closest she could find to Arundhati's Binghamton. The fact that the world-famous Niagara Falls would just be in her backyard was interesting news for Neena. But, even that wasn't as exciting as the prospect of coming in the vicinity of Arundhati! One of the first few things Neena did after landing in Buffalo was to check out the Greyhound bus timings to travel to Binghamton. She found that the journey involved a couple of hours on Highway 90 to Syracuse and another hour and half to Binghamton on Highway 81. Just three and half hours! Neena thought, happily, that she could make that trip practically every weekend.

After Neena landed in Buffalo the two buddies wanted to meet as soon as possible – after all, it had been a whole year since they had parted. But they had to settle for phone calls for almost a month because of the pressures Neena had to deal with of admission formalities and of settling in a completely foreign environment. Finally in October she was able to buy her first Greyhound bus ticket to Binghamton. After the last lecture on Friday she rushed to the bus station on Ellicott Street and boarded the bus. She waited anxiously in her seat as the portly driver of the bus took his time to settle in his vast seat and adjusted his headset and numerous other dials and controls of the bus. He then waited a few more minutes to allow the last few passengers who in their unhurried ways got on the bus and reluctantly ambled to their seats. Neena exhaled a sigh of relief

when the doors squeaked shut and the giant bus heaved out of the bus station.

In a short time the bus had paid toll and entered Route 90. As it settled into a steady rhythm of 65 mph, Neena gazed at the view outside. The highway was lined on both sides with tall green trees and there were even more trees beyond. Unlike her home country, where one could easily see miles of terrain in the distance, Neena only saw a thick wall of tall green trees. Occasionally the tree-line broke and she got a glimpse of the distant terrain which was now a colorful mixture of green, red, and some orange. Neena wasn't familiar yet with the full glory of the autumn of upstate New York, and so, she was startled by these unusual colors of the distant hills. In her excitement of meeting Arundhati, she barely recognized the hint of impending demise of the leaves adorning those beautiful red and orange colors. It is interesting how the state of our mind affects how we interpret nature.

Arundhati had come to the bus station on Chenango Street to receive Neena. The re-union of these two great friends was worth many pictures or even a movie clip. Sadly, no one recorded the event. The two girls ran into each other's arms and shrieked a rapid-fire salvo of incoherent exclamations and questions, unmindful of the mildly amused Americans around them. "Hi, Hey, It's been so long, How are you, Oh God, Here we are finally", and similar words were blurted in high pitch voices, which could not really capture how they felt at that moment. After the initial euphoria had subsided, Neena became aware of her surroundings, and she noticed for the first time that a young man was standing at a little distance with his hands tucked in his jean pockets and was watching them with a faint tilted smile. Clearly, he was with Arundhati and had accompanied her to the bus station. Neena felt a tiny shiver of

jealousy. She had wanted Arundhati all to herself at this long awaited meeting and felt intruded by his presence.

Arundhati caught the questioning look in Neena's eyes. She beckoned him to come closer and explained to Neena that Rajan was a good friend of hers, and it was actually he, who was giving Neena a ride in his car. Neena gave a polite nod and shook hands with Rajan. He was tall and dark with average looks. Large, silver framed eyeglasses covered his bright, twinkly eyes, and he certainly had a pleasant smile. That smile helped slightly mitigate Neena's misgivings about seeing him there. Rajan didn't say anything beyond a "Hi", nor did he utter a word during the ride back from the station. He had clearly noticed these girls' deep friendship, and wisely kept quiet. He even let them both sit in the backseat and sat alone in the front like a taxi driver. The conversation inside the car could be described as loud and non-stop; and it lasted the entire journey of 25 minutes. When they reached Arundhati's apartment and got out of the car, Neena realized that she had thus far completely ignored Rajan.

She thought, "Poor chap. He spends his precious time to give me a ride, and I treat him like a driver!"

Aloud, she said to him, "Rajan, your driving is so smooth! I didn't notice how quickly we reached." And tapping on the old burgundy Nissan Stanza, she added, "That's a nice car!"

Well, Rajan knew it was not his smooth driving why time had flown so quickly. But he simply delivered another toothy smile and said he would be happy to be at her service any time during her stay.

Turning to Arundhati, he said, "So, I take it I should leave you two alone?"

Neena once again felt a stab of jealousy when she heard Arundhati asking Rajan if he could stay and have dinner with them. To her relief Rajan declined politely and left.

Neena stayed in Binghamton for all of four days, and she followed Arundhati's every movement like a Terrier puppy. They talked and talked the entire first day till their voices became hoarse. There were so many stories to share and so much news to catch up with! Arundhati inquired about all the Mavashis in their girls' dormitory at their Institute. Neena recounted her recent clashes with them, and had a hearty laugh at how she had tormented them. She opened her bag of goodies and poured out all the sweets that Arundhati was so fond of. It was Neena's happiest day since her arrival in the US.

Rajan left them alone the first day, but visited the next morning uninvited. He joined them for lunch and hung around afterwards without being too meddlesome. He helped in small things like cutting onions and tomatoes and operating the microwave, while the girls went about their chatting. At the end of the second day, Arundhati suddenly remembered that she had to finish some urgent work for her advisor, and so she asked Rajan to look after Neena the following day if he didn't mind. Neena wasn't too happy about having Rajan as Arundhati's substitute. But she had begun to accept his presence, especially since Arundhati appeared to treat him as her trusted friend.

So the next morning, Rajan took Neena around the SUNY Binghamton campus in his old Stanza. Neena felt that the campus was not very different from the one in Buffalo, but then she had taken so little interest in her own campus thus far. From the moment she had landed in Buffalo her heart had been in

Binghamton. So, this was her first real look at an American university campus.

Rajan pointed at the *Bearcats* sports arena of the University Basketball team. The city had its own separate team called *The Senators*, he informed her. Then there were the departmental buildings – each with a distinct architecture and with huge lawns around them. There was the *Office of International Student and Scholar Services* with its extremely friendly staff, free coffee, and piano. Rajan parked his car and took Neena inside.

A large woman with bright golden hair that surrounded her soft round face like a halo, welcomed them at the reception, “Hey Rajan, how is it going?”

“Couldn’t be better Christine! How about you?” Rajan seemed right in Christine’s alley in terms of casual conversation. Neena was still new to this American art of meaningless yet socially convenient conversation.

After the round of the International Office and its free coffee, they walked through the lush green lawns to the University Library and then to the University Chapel which was used for Sunday prayers as well as for student gatherings. Fall had just made its appearance, so the lush green color of the deeply wooded campus was taking on shades of red and orange. The wind was brisk but not yet persuasive enough to make the leaves leave their high perch. The cool breeze created a low rustling sound in the quiet of the campus, like a ripple on a placid lake. Neena felt very pleasant under the bright and warm Sun.

They had lunch in a Mediterranean café. Neena tried the falafel sandwich at Rajan’s assurance that she would like it. It

was good, albeit a little bland. After lunch, he took her for a quick ride through the Binghamton city and pointed at a few well-known places like the *Tri-Cities Opera*. Even though he had found out that Neena didn't care much for art, he went into a lengthy explanation of what an Opera was, and said that she should try it some day. "Yes, why not! I will!" responded Neena laughing.

Neena had always had guys around her right from her school days. She was an ardent sports lover from childhood, and played many sports very well. She in fact looked very athletic and loathed any sort of feminine softness. She took pride in her physical toughness and didn't care much about cosmetics or how she dressed. Having guys around was a normal occurrence for her when she played basketball or practiced her gymnastics routines. She had never felt anything unusual while running to the basketball hoop through a crowd of guys trying to stop her, or while doing high-fives with them with sweaty, dirty hands, and sharing a soda with them after winning a volleyball game.

But, at the same time, she cringed from the scholarly type – the bookworms and literature junkies – which abounded in her top-rated engineering college. As a result of this distaste, she had rarely been too close to anyone who took interest in art or listened to Urdu ghazals.

Well, Rajan happened to be exactly of the latter type. He was not at all a sportsman. He was a serious scholarly type and played ghazals or classical music on his car stereo all the time. When he inserted his car key to start the car, the stereo came on first, and to Neena's consternation, he hummed along with the music for a few seconds before turning on the engine. Politeness was not one of Neena's virtues, and she openly made fun of Rajan's singing, and added that he was likely to get old early by listening to such sad songs. When she inquired about his sports

interests, he mentioned that he might have a good hand for ping pong.

Suppressing her laugh Neena asked "Ping pong? What is that?"

"Oh, I think we call it table tennis in our home country." He said, aware that Neena played many outdoor sports.

"That's good!" Neena had said encouragingly, "You should try more sports."

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The four day vacation came to an end quite quickly, and Neena returned to Buffalo by Greyhound. She was sad for having to say bye to Arundhati, but Arundhati patted her like a big sister and told her that she would be fine. After reaching Buffalo, Neena dropped an email to Arundhati that she had reached safely. When she logged on the computer the next day, she was disappointed to see no response from Arundhati, but was pleasantly surprised to find a note from Rajan. He had obviously obtained her email id from Arundhati. He had written that he was happy to have made acquaintance with the famous friend of Arundhati. He had heard so much about Neena, he said, and the short meeting had only increased his curiosity to know her better. Rajan's note consoled her heavy homesick heart somewhat.

She started to type a reply to Rajan and realized that all her interaction with sportsmen and brushing shoulders with guys hadn't prepared her to write a proper note to a guy – especially of Rajan's type. She wrote a long note nevertheless describing how she had enjoyed her visit to Binghamton and how pleased she was for the hospitality she had received. She

said she was grateful to Rajan for opening her eyes to the American campus life. She sent off this note to both Rajan and Arundhati.

A few weeks passed by. Neena settled down in her graduate student's routine in the Buffalo campus. Her university also was a State University like Binghamton's. That bond added to the force that continued to tug her heart to Binghamton. She gradually grew out of her homesickness and started paying attention to her new classes, professors, roommates, and events happening on the campus. But she kept a routine of sending a daily email to Arundhati and catching her on chat whenever possible. Arundhati acted busy many times, or so it seemed to Neena, and replied to Neena's emails with short one-liners. Rajan, on the other hand, was very enthusiastic in his communication with Neena. He responded to Neena's emails almost instantly, and didn't hesitate to initiate an online chat.

In one of his emails Rajan wrote that the climate in Binghamton had worsened quite a bit – *“the trees have started shedding tears uncontrollably, the warmth in the air has all but disappeared, the sun has been hiding its nervous face more often than not, and the wind roars as if it is heart-broken!”*

Neena was amused to read the note, and was pleased at the hint that she was being missed. No one had ever said that to her before. Not even that heartless Arundhati whom she loved so much!

Neena responded to Rajan's poetic lines with mocking comments such as, “Hey big guy, don't just sit there and cry like a girl. Go learn some ice skating.” But, she also added a few lyrics on ‘friendship’ which she had read somewhere. She closed her note with the comment that she had no artistic talent, and to prove it she had borrowed the lyric.

In another note Rajan said, *“A friend is like oxygen – which you hardly notice, but miss it dearly when it’s not there”*.

Neena teased him in her reply that he thought too much like a scientist.

Arundhati, who was often on the cc line of Rajan’s and Neena’s emails, wrote occasionally and succinctly, basically saying that she had to prepare tons of technical documentation for her advisor, in addition to studying for several tests, and so, they should forgive her for not writing. Neena found Arundhati’s laconic responses discouraging and disheartening. Was Arundhati happy to simply delegate to Rajan? Or was she reacting to the growing bond between Neena and Rajan? Neena had no idea. And yet she missed Arundhati miserably and was not at all satisfied with her short notes.

Over time, Neena reconciled herself to Arundhati’s reticence. She redirected the torrent of her feelings into the email exchange with Rajan. Her initial teasing and mischievous notes gave way to more sincere ones. They contained long descriptions of her joys and miseries, her loneliness and mood swings. She was doing great in her studies, she said, but that wasn’t a big deal since it was so easy to get high scores in exams. With longing anxiety, she often inquired about Arundhati’s silence.

Rajan wrote comforting notes to her, asking her to get busy with studies and other activities so she wouldn’t miss her family. He asked her to forgive Arundhati because she was so busy with her work. He added that Arundhati talked about Neena all the time. He praised Neena for her academic success and said *“he was a stargazer and a new star had recently dawned on his sky near Buffalo”*. He asked her *“not to let the Buffalo winter affect the calm and composure of her mind”*.

As soon as the winter vacation bell struck, Neena picked her travel bag and hitched a ride with someone who was driving to Binghamton. The ride on route 90 followed by interstate 81 now showed a rolling landscape dulled by grey skies and brown housetops barely visible beneath white snow. Binghamton itself was dead in the middle of winter now. It looked so different from the last visit. The trees were all barren and covered with snow. The whole world was dull gray with a few dark green shrubs peeking out here and there.

But Neena's depression evaporated as the car approached Arundhati's house. Her heart leapt with joy as soon as she saw the surprised face of Arundhati who didn't know Neena was coming. They both shrieked and hugged in joy and disappeared indoors to avoid the blast of cold wind. Arundhati's gaze caressed Neena fondly and she said, "Wow Neena, you have put on weight. You look chubby and soft now – like a real woman!" Neena blushed and went about complaining and rebuking her friend for being so stingy in her correspondence.

After settling a bit, Neena asked Arundhati where Rajan was. Arundhati raised her eyebrow with a mischievous smile.

"Why do you want to meet Rajan? Let the poor guy study a bit."

Color rose in Neena's cheeks, but she shot back, "Well, I got so used to seeing him with you!"

So they called up Rajan and he showed up almost immediately. He said he had skipped his Psychology lecture, but not to worry since it was a zero-credit course anyway.

“You and psychology?” Neena was back in her teasing mood.

“I think it will help me understand some weird personalities that I come across now and then,” Rajan replied with a wink.

The three of them got busy right away in chatting, munching chips, laughing, singing songs, enjoying every moment of their time together. Luckily this time, Arundhati was relatively free of her research duties. They roamed the campus in Rajan’s Stanza and visited some of their favorite places like Denny’s and the House of Pancakes. They used large plastic bags to slide down the snow piled up in Arundhati’s driveway. They went for what Rajan called “boat rides” on small side-streets that were never cleared by the city’s snow trucks. Rajan’s car actually heaved and rolled in the soft snow as if it were a boat in turbulent water, and the passengers shrieked in delight. Indoors, they watched several Hindi movies and poked fun at the inane dialogs and crazy dances. Rajan took charge of chef’s duties by serving eggs in a variety of forms, which all really tasted the same.

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This time, Neena returned to Buffalo with a smile on her face, completely engrossed replaying the happy moments of the trip.

Thus, these three kids, who had been transplanted thousands of miles away from their homes, found solace and enjoyment in such happy gatherings which occurred often, although not often enough. Rajan once made a trip to Buffalo alone in his car and Neena took him to see the Niagara Falls. Neena had seen it several times, since it was a standard tourist

spot for all her visitors. But, every time she visited it, it amazed her to no end to consider that that immense cup of nature had been overflowing for millions of years. And, of course, she couldn't miss the delight of watching Rajan getting soaked to the bone and struggling in vain to keep his glasses dry while riding the "maid of the mist" through the center of the horseshoe waterfall.

On a couple of other weekends, Neena visited Binghamton by Greyhound. Arundhati was back on the treadmill – once again busy serving her advisor with his unending demand of conference papers. Rajan and Neena now had resigned themselves to Arundhati's scarce availability and carried on without her. Spring was at the doorstep, but the weather was still quite cold. Yet these two young people preferred to drive around and visit scenic spots. Driving up to Ithaca to grab some ethnic food; and then continuing up to the Cayuga Finger Lake was one of Rajan's favorite ideas. He took photos during their trip to the Cayuga Lake, and mailed a few of them to Neena with a note that said, "*Here is an imitation that can only approach the perfection of the original*". Neena usually kept her hair short to match her tomboy image, but now the photos showed a different Neena – one with hair flowing to her shoulder. She had started growing it since Rajan had once commented "*long hair might suit her better*".

As February rolled in, Arundhati announced that she needed to go home for some urgent family affair. Her advisor grudgingly allowed this untimely break. Neena came to Binghamton to spend a few days with Arundhati before her departure. She helped pack Arundhati's bags and did her economy gift-shopping at the local CVS.

Neena and Rajan went to see Arundhati off at the airport. It was again a very emotional moment for Neena and Arundhati

– two close buddies separating for almost a month. Rajan watched them at the gate from a respectful distance. On the way back from the airport they were both very quiet. Neena was close to tears and the ghazals playing in the car made her feel worse. Rajan had taught her some Urdu, and so, she recognized the lyrics of the ghazal *“I was never so speechless as I am now”*. But she didn’t object to the music and instead allowed her mind to rise and fall, throb and toss along with the music. Rajan drove her to the bus station and bade her goodbye as her bus left for Buffalo. Neena watched him from the window – motionless, his winter jacket fluttering in the wind. As the bus moved away, he grew smaller and fainter in the snow swirling around him. As he disappeared in the gray mist, she broke down into a torrent of tears that was unstoppable for a long time.

Why do people become so attached to each other? Neena wondered. Her mood continued going downhill as the bus left Binghamton and passed through various little towns of upstate New York. The moon was out early and it bathed the snow-covered landscape in its silvery light making it look eerie. Spurious streaks of faint yellow light streamed out of large, sparsely populated houses in which the inhabitants were getting ready to call it a day. Neena’s mind was in a whirlpool, and she wondered why she couldn’t be at peace like everyone else. She felt that Arundhati (and now Rajan) had ruined her life by being so nice, and by making her so dependent on them.

She reached Buffalo by late night. The blast of cold was enough to crush her soul and she felt as if she were sentenced to hard labor in Siberia. Her roommates greeted her, but they might as well have been shadowy figures in a dream. She opened her email inbox and saw a message from Rajan saying that *“although he was light-years away from being a substitute for her great friend, she should buzz him up for anything”*. He had said that the endless cups of tea and dumb movies were so much fun with

her sitting next to him. He asked her to write “as often as possible” and said that her notes “were a source of inspiration, joy, and peace”. After reading that affectionate note, Neena wrote back in anger and frustration that he and Arundhati should stop being so nice and kind to her and just leave her alone!

The human mind does worse at certain times of the day – like early morning or late evening. It is only sensible to turn off your ‘thought engine’ at such times. The evening of her return to Buffalo was one such terrible evening for Neena. The next day was altogether a different day – a new day. She was wonderfully refreshed and in great energy to get back to her routine in Buffalo. The world that had appeared eerie and ghastly the previous night suddenly looked bright, beautiful, and full of promises. The love and friendship of the Binghamton folks, which had seemed like a terrible weakness, became her strength as she got out of the house.

Her morning walk through the piles of snow was enchanted by the serene peace that pervaded the campus, occasionally broken by the sound of snow melting and falling off the trees. Small groups of little children, covered from head to toe in colorful jackets and hats, waited at street corners for their school bus. They were in no hurry to rush to school and become learned. They appeared rather more interested in making little snowballs and throwing them at their dads or moms.

Upon reaching her department, Neena was quick to write to her friends and request them to ignore her anomalous note sent the previous evening. Everything was just perfect!

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Epilogue

During Neena's last visit just before Arundhati's scheduled return to Binghamton, Rajan took her to Giovanni's – an upscale Italian restaurant that served delicious finger food which resembled the Indian pakoda. Rajan had dressed up nicely and looked a bit uneasy as they ate food. Neena, as usual, made fun of his formal attire and continued teasing him for something or the other. Her light-hearted bantering made him more nervous by the minute.

After dinner, they went to a peaceful little spot on the campus and sat on a dry patch in the grass. There wasn't a soul in sight on that dreary cold evening. Several minutes passed in utter silence. Finally, Neena asked him what the matter was. He looked up and said to her that he was in love with her. Neena was startled to hear that and didn't know how to respond. She asked him what he meant.

He explained in an uncertain voice, "Well, that means I want to be with you forever".

"It means I will do anything to make you happy, and you won't need anyone else", he added.

The words sounded like music to her ears. After all, nobody had ever said such things to her before. She thought of her bitter loneliness and how she itched to have someone completely to herself. But just then the last part of what he had said started ringing louder in her mind: "*And you won't need anyone else!*" Another train of images flashed in her mind – she getting into a car with Rajan and driving away, Arundhati standing by the roadside waving them goodbye and finally turning her back to walk away. Neena felt dazed; her head ached to see the car stop and turn around, but it didn't.

She suddenly stood up and spoke to Rajan in a choked voice that was half angry and half pleading. She said that she did not reciprocate his feelings. He was just a friend, and she would never allow anyone to come between her and Arundhati!