

Cooked in Princeton

Relationships sometimes go through chapters – first chapter, second chapter, and so on. My first chapter with Bindu was really a non-chapter. Not much to write home about. But, this story is about the second chapter – a much more interesting one. I got the opportunity to make this second entry into Bindu’s life when unexpected business reasons forced me to make a trip to the US.

When I made that urgent phone call to Srinu in October his response was enthusiastic and encouraging.

“Hey Mohit, how are you doing?” His crisp, booming voice sounded warm and welcoming.

“Srinu, I am doing great. Hey, do you mind if I stayed at your place for a few days? I am visiting NJ and have a few business matters to take care of in the area.” I came to the point straightaway.

I had lied about the duration of my stay. It was actually going to be *a few weeks* rather than just *a few days*. And the idea of spending money on hotel was out of the question due to my precarious financial situation.

“No, no. Not at all! It would be fantastic to have you over here,” Srini replied without a pause. “But, business in Jersey? I thought you guys only go to sunny California for that.”

“I know, I know! Why don’t I explain in person,” I said. It wasn’t really all that complicated to explain, but, with Srini you had to be careful. He didn’t let you off until every word in your argument fit properly to create some sensible logic.

Srini and I had been together at the graduate school at Northeastern University. Srini was the serious, studious type, and I was his complement at our little 2-bedroom apartment near the University campus. I did the cooking because I loved it. Srini ate what I prepared because he had no time for kitchen. (He often said, “*Wouldn’t it be nice if we had pills for lunch and dinner?*”) I was known as a mischief-maker among our friends, and Srini had no time for trifles. Basically, Srini was rather dull from a social point of view. But, for me he was like a big brother; he kept me on track. He warned me against the numerous and dangerous temptations of the American campus life. He pushed me to get my passing grades and certificates. It was no surprise that during the time that Srini got a Master’s *and* a Ph.D. I managed to collect just one of the two degrees I attempted. One was in Economics which I left half-way because I soon realized it wasn’t going to improve my personal economy, and the other, which I actually completed, was in Actuarial Science. If I did not have Srini breathing down my neck, I might have left school without a degree.

“I will fly most likely the first week of November,” I told Srimi.

“That’s just a couple of weeks away. That is so exciting!” Srimi chirped uncharacteristically.

It was quite unlike Srimi to be so exuberant. But, then, it had really been long – almost ten years – since we had met in person. We had exchanged email often and talked on phone a couple of times, but hadn’t seen each other after his wedding. Although Srimi appeared indifferent and stiff to people, I knew that he was hungry for friendships and company. But, the poor chap had managed to collect very few friends through his youth, largely due to his overpowering sense of commitment – first to his studies, then to his work.

“So, what would you like from India? Mango *barfi*³⁶, *Kolhapuri chappals*³⁷, and what else?” I volunteered.

“That’s all man. You know it!” Srimi loved the *barfi*, and even in college days he had a whole collection of *Kolhapuri chappals* – a pair for every possible occasion.

After collecting my degree certificate at Northeastern, I had moved back to India. There, I had done sundry jobs for a couple of years and then started “Hans Consulting” with the objective of making money in the insurance business. My idea was to create software systems and services to help various aspects like pricing, planning, and projections of the insurance business using Actuarial techniques. Initially, I had started off taking up miscellaneous projects for US-based companies to generate profits that could be used to fund the development of my own Actuarial products.

³⁶ Barfi is family of sweets shaped like cubes.

³⁷ Kolhapur chappal is a type of a famous Indian leather footwear.

As soon as the products were ready with their shiny user interfaces, I had all but stopped doing offshore projects and focused on selling my products in the Indian market. Unfortunately, the response of the Indian market was lukewarm; potential customers had reacted as if we were selling some futuristic stuff that had no practical use. Months went by without any sale. Our stash of savings had vanished, and the team had started showing signs of anxiety. In order to survive, we had no alternative but to go back to our old business of doing offshore projects. I had to put on my hunter's gear and go west looking for projects once again.

The flight from London to Newark was uneventful and boring. I had long ago lost all interest in peeking down at the clouds from window seats, and had fitfully dozed off in my aisle seat. I felt no interest whatsoever in the person sitting next to me or anyone else on the plane. (Except maybe just a wee bit of sympathy for the crew who had to stay awake and move about the entire flight). I had also long ago stopped ordering special meals. There was really nothing special about flying any more. Through the vagaries of repetition and economic realities, air travel had become a burdensome and tiresome but necessary chore!

But, the moment the plane landed, I was back to life – like a baby waking from a deep slumber. I immediately sent a text message to Srinu tipping him of my arrival. Srinu was already about halfway on the rather long drive from his house to the Newark airport.

Srinu's house was in Princeton – a beautiful, green university town in New Jersey. As I waited for Srinu at the passenger pick-up area, I realized that until then, I had not given much thought to the fact that Srinu didn't live alone – he lived

with his wife Bindu. I was going to come face to face with Bindu! Bindu – who had been my colleague for two years in Mumbai. Was she just a colleague? No! She had been my goddess, the reason of my heartache!

Of course, that was ten years ago! I was pretty sure that in these intervening ten years, I had been cured of my infatuation for her. But, was that true? Could I really face Bindu? Will she recognize me?

I began to wonder if the thick curtain of ten long years had been just as flimsy as blotting paper. In those ten years, I had buried myself in building my actuarial business, assuming that being a workaholic would cure my heart of the malady called Bindu. I had worked insane hours, and avoided people and things that might remind me of that wonderful piece of my past when I thought of nothing but Bindu. I had avoided meeting Srini even. I had shunned music and poetry and dug deep into the self-improvement sections of bookstores. And now, after ten years, I thought I was ready to walk into Bindu as if she were just an old acquaintance. Was I out of my mind?

Unfortunately, it was too late for all those questions. Srini had reached and was waving at me from his large Chrysler. He – still the big brother – came around, patted me on my head and shoved me into his car. The hour-long drive to his house seemed to take only minutes as we tried to catch up on people and events.

“Bindu, this is my best friend Mohit,” Srini introduced me to his wife when she opened the door and came forward to receive us.

“Hello Bindu, nice to meet you again. Oh, by the way, Srini was *not* my best friend at college, he was the worst”, I said smiling.

When was the last time I had seen Bindu? Of course! It was at their wedding, which I had wanted to avoid so badly. Bindu had been all besieged by her relatives and friends. She had awarded me just a flitting glance and a brief smile as I had passed in front of her and Srini in a long line of people, just like the devotees who get a second or two in front of the famous deities in India.

This time, at her doorstep in Princeton, Bindu smiled at me a little longer and showed a faint hint of recognition. It had been ten long years, and the fiery crush I had felt for her back then had all but extinguished – or so I had thought. But, my age- and time-hardened heart jumped a few inches when I got an eyeful of Bindu.

As Srini put my bags away and led me to the dining table, Bindu brought a tray of tea and biscuits and said, “You must be eagerly waiting for a nice hot ginger tea. The airline tea is so awful.”

I was relieved to see that Bindu had graciously accepted me in her house. I sat down and reviewed the place that was going to be my dwelling for the coming days.

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It was Sunday morning. It had been a week since my arrival at Bindu’s household. Thankfully, neither Srini nor Bindu had reacted unfavorably to the news that I might be staying much longer. On the other hand, they had seemed quite pleased at the prospect. I did my best to be as little trouble as possible. I

had my own rented car and I did my own laundry. I kept my room tidy and clean. I even ate outside as often as possible. I enjoyed the mix of Mexican, Italian, and Deli foods so much that I didn't really mind eating out. It was, in fact, Bindu who quite frequently insisted that I ate with them.

And, of course, it was so wonderful to be around Bindu. Watching her walk around the house, taking in the fragrance of her movements, hearing her voice linger in the rooms of the house – it was all like living in a dream.

But, almost as if we had a tacit, unspoken understanding, neither of us brought up any stories from our distant past – from the time when Bindu and I had worked together in Mumbai. I entertained Srini and Bindu mostly with stories of my business misadventures, and Bindu told me about her social circle in Princeton. It troubled me to see that she had lost some of her youthful enthusiasm and energy that I had so madly admired ten years ago. Every now and then she made remarks that betrayed an underlying boredom and sense of resignation.

That Sunday morning, Bindu and I met in the dining room for our usual first cup of tea of the day. Srini was away in Albany for some work. Bindu and I sat against the large window gazing outside and sipped my favorite ginger tea. The sky was gray and there was a gentle breeze that made the tall Christmas trees sway very slightly. (I could never remember the names of all those trees; so, I called them all Christmas trees!)

I put forth my proposal, "Bindu, shall we go for a walk?"

Bindu didn't appear to like the idea. "No way! It looks very cold and windy outside. I can't walk in that weather," she protested.

“Come on, it’s all right,” I implored Bindu, “Just a short walk, please”.

Bindu agreed reluctantly. After we ambled out of the driveway onto the main road, I glanced at Bindu. She held her jacket tight to her body and walked in a straight brisk gait looking ahead as if she were trying to reach some place. I said, “Bindu, come on, you have got to slow down. Enjoy the view. Look at the trees. Aren’t they lovely?”

Bindu started and looked at the trees as if for the first time. After a while, she sighed and said, “Yeah! The Fall colors do look pretty, don’t they! But, Fall is almost gone. And the sky is so cloudy and depressing. And what do you like about the fog?”

“Oh yes, the Fall!” I said in a dreamy sort of tone. “Srini and I used to spend rolls and rolls of film in Northeastern shooting those amazing views, the great variety of colors – red, orange, yellow, green.” Then, pointing at the heaps of fallen leaves under our feet, I said, “Don’t you love that crunchy sound?”

I fell silent for a moment and continued, “Yes, the Fall is gone. But, this early winter is equally beautiful. The clouds, the wind trying to shake the leaves off the trees, the tiny droplets of the fog. I feel nothing but Mother Nature’s love.”

Bindu kept quiet. So, I continued, “Don’t you remember you yourself used to be so crazy about seeing even a patch of such wilderness? Don’t you know, in India people stop their cars on freeways when they see foggy, cloudy spots? They pay big bucks to stay at wooded hill-stations? And you are living in one practically all the time!”

Bindu didn't say anything.

After a while I glanced at Bindu again and saw that she was surveying the landscape a bit, inhaling deep breaths of the fresh air. Occasionally, she closed her eyes, turned her face upward, and let the cool wind spray tiny droplets on her face.

As I walked alongside her, I remembered that it was Bindu who used to snatch me away from work and computers and make me join her group of so-called "Friends of Nature". Where we worked in Mumbai, there was hardly any nature to boot. But, still, Bindu and her long-haired friends used to adore every little shrub or piece of rock that they came across.

We continued to walk along. As I watched her beautiful face gradually becoming one with our surroundings, I had the uncontrollable urge to wrap my hand around her waist and pull her towards me. Of course, I had had numerous such urges back in Mumbai. I had resisted then, and I resisted now, from doing anything of that sort, and simply contented myself with the fact that she had agreed to join me for the walk.

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Then came the following Saturday. Srinu had once again disappeared from town, this time to Baltimore. Just before departing, he had said to me, "You know, I normally don't travel much, because I don't want to leave Bindu alone. But, since you are here to give her company, I am not turning down these travel assignments."

He had paused a moment and said to Bindu, "Bindu, talk a bit with the poor fellow, will you? He might be homesick."

Homesick! I hadn't felt so much at home in years, and I did not mind Srini's traveling at all!

After our walk last weekend Bindu had warmed up somewhat and had started chatting up a bit. But, what she said was still rather worrisome. She talked about feeling bored and worthless. She said she felt like one of the paintings on the wall. I asked what she was reading up at the public library. She gave me a strange look and said, "Nothing!" This was unexpected from someone who – I remembered distinctly – used to turn the world upside down to get her hands on books that I recommended to her in my effort to appear wise and intelligent. If nature was her first love, books were a close second. (*Alas, I wasn't in the list at all!*)

Clearly, I felt, Bindu hadn't taken her stay in the New World in the right spirit.

When we met for tea at the dining table, I suggested to Bindu that we took a ride to a coffee house nearby and had our tea there.

"A ride? This early?" said Bindu in astonishment.

"Why not! Just for a change. You know those cafés open at 7. You make tea for me all the time. Let me buy you some today," I pleaded, "You know they put cinnamon in the chai they make over there."

Bindu smiled at my school-boy persistence. "Ok, whatever you say," she said. "But, you drive. I hate driving."

"Gladly! Can we take your car please?" I asked her. Bindu handed me the keys and I jumped into the driver's seat of her beautiful BMW convertible.

I eased the sleek and squat ash-gray BMW out of the driveway on to the main road and started whistling softly.

Bindu looked at me with amusement and said, "You like driving, don't you!"

"Only in this country!" I said. "Of course, I drive in India too. But, it's pure heaven to drive in America. Beautiful roads, clear signs, scenic routes, no danger of ditches, and no idiots in your way. I don't understand why anyone would hate driving in America," I remarked – an obvious jab at Bindu. She ignored my provocation.

After a few minutes, without warning I pushed a button that opened the canvas hood of the car and folded it back all the way. The cool breezy air rushed in, throwing our hair dancing all over the place. Specks of the early morning light peeking through the clouds started flashing past our cheeks.

Bindu appeared shocked and said, "Mohit! What are you doing? It's so chilly! And the wind is going to ruin my hair!"

"Please, just hold on for a couple of minutes and then tell me how it feels," I begged Bindu to bear with me.

Bindu struggled to hold her hair together and also to hold her jacket tight to her chest. But soon she realized the futility of it all and gave up. As she closed her eyes in exasperation, she realized that the breeze wasn't all that chilly. After a minute or two she said, "You know, it's actually not so bad! The air feels so refreshing. And, I like the music of the wind."

I was happy to hear her apt description of the soft sounds of the breeze. I didn't say anything and just let her enjoy the experience.

"You know Mohit, I have seen Americans drive with their hoods open, but, I did not know it was so much fun," Bindu said.

I threw a furtive glance at her happy face. "But, of course you do! Don't you remember those silly bike-rides you guys – I mean we all – used to take in the Goregaon hills?" I said, bringing up this wonderful and painful memory.

After a minute or so, Bindu said, "It is a bit cold though, isn't it?"

"Yes", I agreed and after another couple of minutes of listening to the whistling sounds drew the roof back in place.

"Bindu, there are people in this world who would give anything to own a car like yours, throw its top open, and enjoy a clean unpolluted breeze and soothing sunshine! Heck, if their air was this fresh and clean, even their scooter rides would be so much more fun! You know, in India, I can't even roll down the stupid windows of my Maruti. And you drive this sports car every day and you haven't played with these buttons even once?" I tried to sound incredulous.

Bindu looked at me with a smile and said, "Guilty as charged! But, you know mister, I am gonna do it every day now!"

For the first time, I felt Bindu resembled her old self of a long time ago.

During our time together in Mumbai, I had never told Bindu how much I had been crazy for her. Was that a mistake? The moment I had come to know about Srini's engagement with her, I had done the disappearing act. I had run away – from Bindu, from Mumbai, from my job. But, I suspected that Bindu knew. She knew about my feelings for her.

I drove the BMW on for a long time, opening and closing the roof intermittently. I wandered through quiet neighborhoods, cruised through surprise patches of densely wooded avenues, drove by serene lakes, and chugged through college traffic on the one-ways of the University campus. Bindu sat quietly, throwing occasional amused glances at me as I caressed the steering wheel of the BMW.

To someone it might have appeared as if Bindu was a visitor and I was a resident of Princeton giving her a tour of the nice spots in the neighborhood.

When we finally stopped at a coffee-shop, she took the car key from me and said with a smile, "Don't you think you had enough fun already? Let me enjoy some driving now!"

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It was Friday evening. I had returned home from an exasperating meeting with an Indian co-founder of a startup. This guy somehow thought he knew everything about the economics of doing software development in India, and didn't accept that the rates I was offering were reasonable. Instead of discussing the architecture and design of his products, we had spent most of the time analyzing salaries of Indian programmers and the cost of snacks we provided to them for free.

Weary from the tiresome meeting, I slumped in one of the chairs in the dining room. Bindu had made the American version of my favorite dish *Pohe*. In addition to tomatoes and onion, she had also sprinkled a liberal quantity of green peas. Just looking at my steaming plate, I felt rejuvenated. I relished the dish slowly and deliberately, and complimented Bindu at every bite. "Wow, this makes me homesick. I want to go home!" I said. Bindu smiled and got up to make tea.

I turned to Srini and said, "Hey guys, I propose that we go for a ride and check out the downtown scene."

"What, now? It's Friday evening. That place would be packed with students and retired professors!" Bindu protested.

"Exactly, that's why! We will get some intellectual inspiration."

As usual, Bindu was too kind to shoot me down. She smiled and said to Srini, "You know, I think he just wants to drive my BMW."

As we got into the car I rummaged through the CDs in the glove compartment and picked up a CD of A. R. Rahman³⁸ songs and slid it into the CD player. Soon, the haunting melody *Kaise tum mujhe mil gayee* (How I found you) of *Ghajini*³⁹ trickled out through the Bose speakers. The beautiful crisp sound pierced right through my heart. Bindu, who was sitting next to me in the passenger seat, sensed my agitation and looked at me questioningly.

"What a beautiful song!" I exclaimed, "And what a mind-blowing sound quality!" I said shaking my head.

³⁸ A R Rahman is a famous Indian music composer.

³⁹ Ghajini is a Hindi movie.

Outside, it still wasn't very dark. But, the downtown was lit up with neon signs, and people – mostly couples – walked hand in hand on the walkways. It was Friday evening and so, no one seemed in a hurry. I found a parking spot which I grabbed immediately.

“Let's take a short walk, shall we?”

Bindu glanced uncertainly at the buzzing footpaths, but complied. We walked past cafes, restaurants, and a few stores that were still open for business. The air felt so lively due to the human presence all around us.

“This is what I miss in the suburbs. We can't deny our longing for human company, can we?” I said.

“But these are all strangers. What's the point of such company?” Bindu protested.

“That's exactly the point. Strangers or not, we just need to be among humans to feel comforted. Don't you feel kind of lonely and disconnected sitting alone in your house or walking on those roads where there is not a soul in sight?”

“You know Bindu, back in India, you think people have a great social life; you know – lots of friends and relatives. But, actually, it's just an ocean of people, and everyone is a stranger. What they enjoy is just that feeling of being a drop *of* the ocean,” I said stressing the word “of”.

While we sat in a café sipping our chai latte, the famous physicist Freeman Dyson walked in. I was so surprised to see him that I stood up reflexively. But, of course, all others in the café paid scant attention, if at all, to Dyson. He walked up slowly

to the counter, the girl there smiled at him and said, “Professor Dyson, what can I get for you?”, and Dyson ordered whatever he usually ordered for himself. That was it.

I turned to Bindu and said, “Just look at that! One of the most famous physicists walks in. Everyone here obviously knows him. But, they leave him alone to enjoy his coffee. That’s the beauty of this country. In India? Celebrities get run down by fans and strangers alike before they can say ‘coffee’. Who needs that kind of social life?”

Bindu smiled uncomfortably at my pearls of wisdom and watched Dyson stumble out of the café, spilling a few drops of his coffee as the spring door banged on him. The café girl ran up to him and asked him not to worry about the coffee on the floor. Dyson walked to his fiery red RX-7 deep in thought – worrying undoubtedly about the fate of the universe – and drove away all alone.

“Mohit, I see what you are saying. But, one needs to talk. You can’t just watch people like a peeping Tom and feel great about it.” Bindu wasn’t convinced.

“Ok, you want to talk? Just watch me!” I said and turned my attention to the young woman sitting at a nearby table fiddling with her new Microsoft Surface.

“Oh, wow! Is that the new Surface you are playing with?” I bent closer and asked that woman in a loud voice.

“Oh yeah! It’s wonderful. I just got it as a birthday gift. I am trying to figure out how to go on Facebook.” The young woman gave me a broad, happy sort of smile and said.

“I am sure that’s pretty easy. How about that nifty keyboard? Is it easy to use?” I faked some more excitement in my voice about that new gadget and asked.

“It’s not too bad. You have to get used to it though. No banging, you just have to touch the buttons gently.” Lisa (I gave her that name) said without worrying about her choice of words.

“Great! Enjoy your gift!” I said, closing our conversation. Lisa just nodded and turned away.

“See. There! I had a conversation. And Lisa there didn’t feel pressured to give me her number or anything. I don’t have to now invite her to my house for dinner or anything like that. She doesn’t care that I am a cheap-shot CEO. We just had a plain simple conversation!” I said to Bindu. I was surely adding to her exasperation with my lectures.

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My last evening at Srini’s place turned out to be quite a stormy one.

It had been almost two months since I had parked at Srini’s and Bindu’s house. My search for business had turned up nothing. Aside from a couple of short onsite assignments that I had taken care of myself, I had failed to get any big projects that could feed my team back in Pune. I was disappointed, but not demoralized. Some people had shown interest in our actuarial products and had installed demo versions on their machines. It was possible that they would put in an actual order for a few copies of the software.

Bindu had arranged a farewell dinner for me and had even made a cinnamon chocolate cake. She had invited a few

people that I had got to know during my stay. Everything went smoothly almost to the end. Before food, the men sipped wine and discussed politics, while the women discussed house furnishings and warmed up the food. After food, the visitors left one by one, and the three of us were left sipping coffee around the electric fireplace. Unfortunately, at that time, I had spoiled things by starting another of my little lectures to Bindu about what she should do and what she should not.

“Why do you keep selling America to us?” Bindu asked with some irritation.

“I am not selling anything. I am simply trying to remind you, all of us,” I looked at Srinu for support and said, “of where we originally came from, and why we are here in the first place.” Addressing Bindu directly once again I said, “In America, you don’t have to worry about basic necessities of life like water and electricity. You don’t have to start every day dreading unpleasant surprises and unpredictable people.”

“What does all that have to do with me?” Bindu was not in a mood to reason.

“I am just saying, you have the opportunity to go beyond life’s nonsense and do something useful, something fun.”

“I don’t believe this! I thought you were here looking for business and all this time you have been taking pity on me, and trying to rehabilitate me!” Bindu said and walked out of the living room.

There was a stunned silence after Bindu left. Srinu came over to me after a few minutes and patted me, “Sorry Mohit. She gets really upset when anyone tries to give her advice.”

A few minutes later Srinu also bid me good night and went to sleep. I sat there with my coffee cup and stared at the fireplace in silence. I didn't know how long I sat there.

"Mohit, I am so sorry about that outburst." I whirled around and saw Bindu sitting on the sofa behind me. I had no idea when she had come back into the living room.

"And you know, I admit I am going to miss your speeches," she continued with a smile.

"You showed me so many things that I wasn't able to see myself. Rather, I was refusing to see. The wonderful life I have here. I can have." Bindu's voice trembled but didn't invite consolation. I did not interrupt.

"I will miss you because I cannot talk with strangers like you can. And I might forget to open the roof of my BMW."

"Don't worry. I will remind you," I said. "And, believe me you *will* make friends once you are out there."

"But, I cannot go to downtown every time I feel lonely," Bindu said turning to me.

"Turn on NPR! It will bring in the world for you! Bindu, life is too great an opportunity to fritter away carelessly ..." I just could not resist putting on my preacher's hat.

But, Bindu interrupted immediately and said with a smile, "Well Professor Mohit! You have failed to fully convince me about all those ideas of yours! You will just have to visit again and try again!"

We both stood up facing each other. Bindu moved forward quickly and awarded me a nice warm hug. I held her for an eternity, and she did not resist. Bindu looked at me with her kind gentle eyes and said, "Mohit, just remember one thing. Don't live in the past. Future can't be all that bad. Let us build a new friendship, shall we?" I nodded obediently.

In that sweet embrace, I realized that it was me who had been rehabilitated. Bindu had magically destroyed all my anxieties and mental knots. It was as if there was this huge dam of sordid emotion built up inside me, and Bindu, with her loving touch, had released it into a peaceful river of freedom. I felt unbelievably alive and strong. I could now really view my love for Bindu for what it was – a great opportunity to build a bridge to a future friendship, albeit of a different kind.

"Please don't take another 10 years to visit me again," Bindu said.

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My flight the next day was on time. I insisted on a window seat this time. I felt a renewed zeal to watch Mother Earth from above and admire her limitless bounty. New Jersey truly lived up to its fame of being "The Garden State". Princeton was far away to the south, but I knew Bindu's house was one among all those numerous neatly planned rows and rows of houses nestled in the greenery like flower pots in a garden.

Bindu was probably out for a walk, making her way to a nearby park. I could see in my mental picture that she was cooking up a plan to gatecrash at Srini's office in the afternoon and pull him out of there for a cup of tea at Peter's Café in downtown. And then I embellished the mental picture even further – Srini wasn't there in his office because he had to go

away to some faraway place at that time and instead of him, I was sitting in his chair as Bindu knocked on his door!