

Dreamland Dessert

I awoke with a start when my smartphone beeped and informed me of the arrival of a text message. The house was extremely quiet. A bright sunny morning flooded from the window into the room. How did I sleep till so late today?! The morning sounds in and around my house are capable of waking up even the most sound sleeper. The newspaper boy, the milkman; even Rukmini, the housemaid, who came early to wash dishes – I had not heard any of them!

The text message was from Priya, checking if “his majesty” had risen up from his royal bed or not.

When I went down the stairs to the living room I saw my parents sitting on the sofa and reading quietly – my dad had the morning newspaper and my mom a women’s magazine. Without moving the magazine away, she said to me, "Dinkar, is

that you? Go and have your breakfast. You can help yourself with the *Upma*²². I hope there is no breakfast meeting today!"

I was quite surprised. Normally, my mom is keen on treating me like a prince: she would not let me move even a stick and serve me everything. And then my dad would grumble under his breath that she was pampering the boy! But, today she was asking me to *help myself*! Well, luckily she was asking me to eat *Upma* and not corn cereal!

"Mom, is everyone on strike today? What happened to the newspaper guy, to Rukmini? How come no one turned up today?" I asked.

"Why do you say that?" she removed the magazine and replied with a bit of surprise, "They all came in at their normal time, did their work, and left."

"Really! That's curious. I did not hear a sound! They make such a racket usually!" I said.

My parents raised their eyebrows and exchanged looks between them. I shook my head slowly not really seeing what was going on. I went back upstairs, got ready in 20 minutes and came down again.

"Mom, sorry, I have to leave. I do have a group meeting at *Wadeshwar*²³," I informed my mother.

"Drive carefully. Don't drive too fast and collect speeding tickets. You know they are very strict these days and have those cameras everywhere." Mom said and then continued her little

²² *Upma* is a popular South Indian breakfast item.

²³ *Wadeshwar* is a popular breakfast place in Pune.

chat with Shanta Bai – our cook – who had just arrived then. They must be discussing the menu for the day.

"*Speeding tickets? Cameras?*" I turned those words in my mind as if they belonged to some strange, foreign lingo, while I got into my *Wagon-R*²⁴ and started the engine. "*Something crazy is going on!*" I thought.

I waved at the security guard sitting at the gate of our housing complex, got out of the society compound, and started driving towards *University Avenue* through the small *Commissioner Lane*. On my right, I noticed that *Chittaranjan Park*²⁵ was crammed with people walking or running at different speeds. There were people of all varieties – different sizes, ages, in different types of clothing – all in busy and happy motion. I was surprised to see the crowd. Did everyone suddenly in the city become health-conscious? Usually the place was occupied only by a few older folks trying to stretch their legs and life spans.

"Hi Dinkar!" a familiar piercing musical voice caught my ear and I looked around. It was Priya walking briskly towards the park in her track-suit to make her usual 20 rounds. As soon as I saw her I felt as if a beautiful butterfly had spread its wings in my heart. I have known Priya for so many years, and yet, every time I see her I fall in love with her all over again.

"Hi Priya!" I shouted excitedly and proceeded to stop the car right there in the middle of the road as was my habit. Priya immediately stopped with her hands on her hips, inclined her head slightly to indicate she was not at all pleased, and said to me, "Oh come on Dinkar, don't stop anywhere you like on the road! We will meet later. Bye!" Then with her right hand she

²⁴ Wagon-R is a car model of the Indian company Maruti.

²⁵ Chittaranjan Park is a well-known park in Pune used by joggers and walkers.

indicated that she would call me, and turned on her heels to the park.

Reluctantly, I pushed the pedal and continued driving my car out of the lane. But I was perplexed by her comment "*Don't stop anywhere you like!*" I did that all the time! And so did everyone! What was going on? Was today a special day – a day when we followed the rules?

University Avenue was a big surprise! There were 3 smooth lanes marked beautifully with white broken stripes and everyone was driving neatly in their lanes. No one was driving over the stripes or trying to squeeze thru narrow gaps between vehicles to get ahead. I glanced at several drivers – they were all driving peacefully, even happily, following the cars in front of them. No one seemed anxious, in a hurry today!

I kept going while trying to absorb these surprises along the way. And they just kept mounting as I turned into *Jungli Maharaj Road*. The traffic there too was humming along peacefully and systematically. No ditches and potholes, no ugly construction, no honking!

Suddenly I felt a gust of wind and realized that my window was open all this time! With a shock I groped for the window button so that I could raise the glass and save myself from the terrible air pollution! I had driven for almost 10 minutes with the window open! I was sure to come down with an attack of some deadly air-borne disease!

But, before I could hit the power window button I realized that the air was actually quite fresh and warm and invigorating! It was even fragrant: there were several florists

sitting on both sides of the street selling Rose, Marigold, Chapha²⁶, Lily, and many other varieties of fragrant flowers.

And surprisingly there was none of the usual foul smells, no trace of the cloud of unburnt petrol and diesel.

Further down the road, there were other very enticing aromas getting added to the mix – those of freshly cooked food like tea, *batata wada*²⁷, and so on. I had of course seen the food stalls every day, but had always shut the smells off. Now, I left my window open and continued driving while inhaling deep breaths of these wonderful olfactory sensations.

The light was red at the pedestrian crossing near *Deccan*²⁸. At this crossing, we usually play the *catch-me-if-you-can* game in which the pedestrians run helter-skelter like chicken and we the vehicle bearers chase them and try to run them down! So, I ignored the red light and continued to drive. The few pedestrians that were crossing the road didn't seem prepared for the game: their expressions indicated shock followed by anger, and they somehow managed to avoid contact with my car. And, further ahead there was a neatly dressed (clean white shirt and khaki pant) policeman wearing smart gold-rimmed sunglasses and carrying a walkie-talkie waiting for me! He quickly cut into my path and signaled me to move to the shoulder. "*Oh no! There go my 300 rupees!*" I cursed under my breath.

²⁶ Chapha is a fragrant Indian flower that comes in a variety of colors.

²⁷ Batata wada is an Indian variety of a vegetable dumpling made of potatoes and onions.

²⁸ Deccan is short for Deccan Gymkhana which is a well-known location in Pune.

"Good morning sir! The road is not just for cars, it is also for pedestrians! What should they do if you drive so recklessly?" he said to me with his hands on my open window.

"I am sorry. I did not see the red light at all. It is so dim!" I lied and made a suitably guilty face. "How much should I pay?" I said, wondering how much bribe he would take to let me off.

"You mean the fine? Well, I will let you go this time with just a warning." He said moving away, "But you should get your eyes checked. There is nothing wrong with the traffic light!"

I gaped at him with my mouth open. He was letting me go without a bribe! And that too so politely! I quickly recovered from my shock and continued driving. Heaven forbid if he should change his mind!

+==+==+==+

Suffice to say, my journey to *Wadeshwar* continued to be full of unceasing and unusual surprises. I did not have to honk or swear at anyone – motorists or bus drivers alike – for trying to get too intimate with me. When I reached *Wadeshwar* another shocker was waiting for me! A big sign showed the way to an underground self-parking and it even had an electronic sign saying 11 out of 40 slots were available! Where did this thing come from? Did PMC²⁹ build this parking facility overnight? I shook my head in disbelief, followed the signs to one of the 11 remaining slots, and came back up using the stairs.

After having suffered so many shocks – albeit pleasant ones – I was frankly quite apprehensive of entering *Wadeshwar*. I dreaded what I was going to see. Would it be an "Olive Garden"

²⁹ PMC is the Pune Municipal Corporation.

– an awful place with disciplined customers, and waiters wearing artificial smiles?

Fortunately, the scene in *Wadeshwar* was completely familiar, unmodified. People were chatting noisily and freely. Customers were calling up waiters loudly to order idli and dosa³⁰. People were walking over to other tables to chat if they saw someone familiar. I felt immensely relieved to see this familiar unruly and disorderly picture. I could have never accepted *Wadeshwar* in any other shape!

My gang of friends was already there – sprawled luxuriously and carelessly at a large table in a corner and chatting loudly. Each sat in a different position – one had his legs stretched on another chair, one yawned with hands behind his head, and so on.

"Hey Dinkar, you are so late! Looks like you had some action yesterday night?" Bipin winked his left eye and asked.

Bipin had a persistent and perverse interest in everyone's night life. I just smiled in reply, pulled a chair where I could find a spot, and sat down. I tried to listen and understand what they were all talking about so animatedly.

"Manmohan really got started on a wrong foot in the debate!" Girish said, "Lalu had asked him such a simple question!"

"*Debate?* Between Lalu and Manmohan? What the hell is going on?" I almost jumped in my seat and exclaimed loudly.

They all turned to give me strange, curious looks. They appeared as if they had seen a ghost.

³⁰ Idli and dosa are popular South Indian snacks.

"Dinkar!" Harsha replied, "Didn't you see the second debate yesterday on TV? There is so much discussion and dissection happening on IPR this morning."

"What the hell is this *IPR*?" I asked incredulously.

"Public radio! Son of a gun, you are always glued to this station! You say that it is the only station that is truly invested in the common good! Did you have vodka this morning or what?" Bipin took the opportunity to mount a fierce attack on me.

I felt as if I had been slapped in the face. Actually, I had a deep interest in politics. I was seen as someone who was always up-to-date on these things. But, this was all too strange, too bizarre, just beyond me. I had no idea what they were talking about. I kept quiet and listened to them for a while longer.

Gradually I gathered this much: that there had been a nationally televised debate of the prime ministerial candidates for the next general election, and the opposite party candidate Lalu had bowled a real turner to Manmohan on the issue of climate change. And since early morning IPR, that is Indian Public Radio, had been running discussion on this debate and all kinds of experts and professors, were poking, twisting, and turning this thing all around.

Granted these were nice, wonderful things; but, when did all these American fads come to India? Was I sleeping like a mummy when all these changes took place? Or hibernating like a frog? I was profoundly perplexed and disturbed, and was wondering how to make sense of what was going on. Just then, a waiter came with my favorite *Tomato Uthappam*³¹ and placed it in front me without saying a word. Well, that was something

³¹ Uthappam is a popular South Indian snack.

familiar! Since the waiter knew that I always ordered *Uthappam* he had got it for me without asking. I pushed away the turmoil in my mind and happily launched an attack on the delicious food in front of me! I was relieved that at least Wadeshwar had not started selling burgers!

In the meantime the discussion at the table continued.

Harsha said, "Well, at least Manmohan was able to shut Lalu off on the subject of the Russian oil and its importance to India! He showed his mettle as a true economist!"

"Did Lalu then get mad and throw a chair at Manmohan?" I asked with malice and tentative confidence. That's what Indian politicians did when they got mad, didn't they?

Once again, everyone turned to me with a surprised look.

"Mr. Dinkar! I like your joke. But, we live in a civilized democracy. Not in Italy or Colombia. We don't allow such things in our society," Rohit, who was quiet so far, said to me with obvious animation and impatience. "Lalu was cool like always!"

"Lalu? And cool?" I was astonished to hear that compliment for Lalu who, in my mind, was an inveterate goon like all Indian politicians.

I suppose I was wrong on that count too. I just didn't seem to get anything right! I sat there in silent but sullen agitation, not sure what to do!

Just then my mobile rang and I looked at it hopefully. It was Priya.

"Hmm, Hello!" I said in a hurry fumbling with the green button.

"Hmm hello? What language is that?" Priya loved to pull my leg at every opportunity.

I was just too stricken to respond to her joke. She continued, "Shall we meet at the public library? In our usual meeting room? We can have your favorite *Amrut-tulya*³² tea next door if you like."

I was getting really, obscenely angry now. "*Public library?* Who the hell started a public library in Pune?"

"Sounds like you are not fully awake yet. I am talking about the library on *Senapati Bapat Road*; the one which just recently shifted into a brand new building?" Priya said in a hopeful tone trying to get through to me.

I was just about to go insane now.

"Priya, can you please come here right away? I want to go with you. I am tired of driving," I said to Priya in a half pleading and half complaining tone like a child. I had no clue where this library was!

"Ok, you are at *Wadeshwar*, right? I will be there in a jiffy." Priya hung up.

After hearing Priya's loving and soothing voice the storm in my mind simmered down a bit. She would certainly set things right for me. Priya was such a darling – truly one in a million! I

³² Amrut-tulya literally means tea that tastes like heavenly nectar. Pune is famous for this brand of tea.

could never understand how she had got stuck with a bozo like me!

Priya appeared at the *Wadeshwar* gate in 10-15 minutes while I continued to suffer through the political discussion at our table. She wore a dark purple dress that neatly fitted her lovely figure. She had a beautiful smile on her lips, and her bright brown eyes had a playful twinkle. Even the slightest breeze made her eager soft brown hair go for a flight. Priya was no doubt very beautiful, a *Miss India* for me at least! Her clothing, her walking, her personality, everything was perfect; there was nothing one could find fault with. Even the older women who only reluctantly praise younger women would call her *proper*.

As soon as Priya approached our table, I got up from my seat, held her hand and pleaded, "Priya, please take me with you right away. These guys are tormenting me with all kinds of nasty stuff – debates, IPR, civilized politicians, and what not!"

Priya commanded great respect in my group. Everyone respected her calm intelligence and admired her dignified beauty. She stood there with her hands on her hips in mock impatience and said in mock reproach, "Guys! What is this? Why are you troubling *his royal highness*? Don't you know he is not in the best of spirits today!" And then she joined everyone as they all laughed and jeered loudly.

Harsha said, "Take him away. He is going to need some serious therapy. He has been having dreams of violence, disorder, people who throw chairs!"

+==+==+==+

I held Priya's hand and gently but firmly I nudged her out of *Wadeshwar*. We got into her *Maruti Zen*³³ and started driving towards the library. Priya loved driving and she drove with great finesse. With amazing ease and speed she rolled from *FC Road* into the smaller but winding *BMCC Road* and then merged into the much wider *Law College Road*. Not a single vegetable cart, bicyclist, or pedestrian came in our way! Of course, by this time, I was getting tired of getting surprised! I was beginning to accept this state of affairs: one in which I was witnessing an amazing and pleasing mix of western values and Indian goodness. Priya showed no surprise at all this, as if it was daily occurrence for her.

We stopped in front of a grand architecture: a modern building that boasted the name *CV Raman Public Library*. It had a huge parking space which was already packed with cars and two-wheelers. There was a tremendous hustle-bustle of people leaving and entering the library, but the activity was all going on peacefully and smoothly. When did Indians become so thirsty for knowledge and learning? And when did they learn to move about without pushing and shoving? My mouth fell open at this, although, instead of feeling a jolt, now I was beginning to smile at these wonders.

"Priya, do you remember the *Fremont Public Library*? When we lived in California, we used to go there all the time!" I said happily and excitedly to Priya.

"Of course I remember. You hardly ever looked at any books! You used to just stare at me! All that thirst for knowledge and learning!" Priya replied laughing and squeezed my hand.

³³ A car model of the Indian company Maruti.

"Such a fantastic library in Pune, I can't believe ..." I left the sentence incomplete and instead said, "Forget the library. Let's go somewhere and have some tea first."

"Sure! We will go to the tea shop. I just need to return a couple of books and pick up a *hold* item." Priya said and tugged me in the direction of the library.

I meekly followed her into the library.

We went to the computerized machines outside the library that swallowed return material (like books) in their big jaws and then entered the library. Priya held me by my hand as if I were a child; she seemed to have understood my *delicate* condition.

Everything was so new to me! I stared at the towering bookshelves with signs such as "British literature", "Anonymous writing", "Translations" and so on. In the "Marathi books" section I was pleased to see a collection of "Baba Kadam". He was my favorite writer when I was in high school.

"Oh, he is the latest teenage sensation!" Priya caught my eyes and commented. Kids still read Marathi books? Incredible!

Priya dragged me away from the books to an inside door. The door was quite impressive – it was decorated with artistic patterns and had the sign "Omkareshwar Tea Garden" at the top – and it led to the tea shop. I was mesmerized by the scene that unfolded in front of me.

The spacious tea shop was within the premises of the library and was filled with various aromas of Indian tea. Young and old alike sat there chatting and sipping tea. Some were reading books or working on their gadgets. There was a large

menu on one of the walls listing a variety of tea flavors. There was "Pune special", "Lucknow special", "Kashmiri chai". I also noticed health flavors like "Green tea" and "Slender tea"!

"Slender tea?" I read aloud.

When Priya noticed my perplexed face, she said, "Dinkar, slender tea is basically *Amrut-tulya* tea made in skimmed milk, low fat. Everything else is the same. It is for fat people like me!"

Priya and fat? I took the opportunity to stare at Priya head to toe. There wasn't an ounce of undesirable fat anywhere! I was unable to take my eyes off her. She held her palm against my eyes and said, "Ok, that's enough. Let me order some tea!"

"Two cardamom, cutting³⁴. And one *Wada*³⁵ please!" she said at the counter.

"*Cutting? In this fancy shop?!*" I wondered. To my surprise, the counter girl showed no reaction. She promptly keyed in the order and said, "Sure ma'am. Here is your token. Just grab a table and we will get your tea in 5 minutes." And then she rang the cash into the cash register.

I felt certain that in this shop they used machines to mix tea of various flavors. To confirm my suspicion I raised my toes and glanced towards the kitchen. And what I saw was an absolute delight to my eyes. There were a number of large vessels steaming with tea and these vessels were manned by equally huge-looking tea-chefs sitting on short stools. They wore clean white dhoti and shirts and stirred the boiling tea with large

³⁴ "Cutting" means half-cup. This request is typically only made at inexpensive tea-stalls.

³⁵ Wada is short for Batata Wada which is a veg dumpling made up of potato and spices.

wooden spoons. Behind them there were a number of neatly dressed young college boys and girls standing attentively waiting eagerly but quietly with large trays of empty tea cups. They watched the tea-chefs with admiration and respect.

My heart rejoiced to see that beautiful scene. My idea of an *amrut-tulya chai* did not involve a machine. This dream-world, or whatever it was, for all its shocks and surprises, had yet to disappoint me.

After settling into a comfortable sofa chair, Priya informed me that the foreign coffee-shops like Starbucks were still around, but, there was no competition for *amrut-tulya chai*!

Our order arrived shortly. I sipped the hot and truly amazing *chai* and Priya watched me while pushing small bites of the *Wada* across her delicate lips. Her eyes brimmed with affection, but also betrayed a deep concern.

Suddenly a person walking by me hit my elbow causing me to spill some tea on the floor. I was about to blurt something like "*Where the xxx are you doing man? Can't you see where you are going?*" But, before I could vent my anger that person bent solicitously and said in the most apologetic tone, "Oh, I am so sorry sir! Please forgive me. Terribly sorry for the mess!" And then he ran and fetched a stack of paper napkins and started wiping the floor. I was dumbfounded by his reaction. I inspected him carefully to see if he was some white westerner, but no! He was a pure blue – pure brown actually – Indian with a thick proud moustache!

He kept muttering apologies while cleaning the floor and wiping the few drops of tea that had spilled on my chair. After he had left, I said to Priya with complete disbelief, "*Did you see that?* So much courtesy, so much consideration! Have you ever

seen that in our country? What has happened to our people? Unbelievable!"

"Dinkar, what is the big deal? Anyone in his place would have done the same. Even you would have done the same! Why are you so surprised?" Priya said raising her beautiful dark eyebrows.

And then she suddenly said, "Come, let's go." She took me to the car by my hand and we drove to the garden walk near *Prabhat Road*. After parking her car (oh yes, there was a pay-and-park facility where Priya paid with her credit card!) we started walking along the familiar beautiful garden walk.

It was just past noon. I could hear the peculiar wordless silence that you only hear in India at this hour. There were no human sounds; just the sounds of leaves rustling, birds cooing, squirrels running, and the faint notes of an old Hindi song that came with the breeze from an open-air tea shop at some distance. These sounds only accentuated the wonderful quiet of the garden walk.

Priya held my hand and took me gently along this most beautiful and my most favorite spot in Pune. There were several couples like us walking, strolling, or just standing.

After going some distance, Priya stopped, turned to me, held my face in her hands and said in a soft, loving voice, "Dinkar, what's wrong? I have been watching you since morning. Why are you so restless, so confused, so lost? Please tell me."

I looked at her big bright eyes and tried to fathom their infinite depth. Her upturned beautiful face was full of infinite love for me; it conveyed affection, tenderness, and concern.

There were thousands of extremely tiny atoms of sweat trembling on her delicate skin, some of which sparkled when an occasional ray of sunlight touched her skin. Her brown eyes appeared dimmer, lighter as they surveyed me without blinking. Before I could decide what to say, she pulled my face down towards her and raised her lips to mine. "*Is she trying to kiss me? In an open public place?*" my mind went into a sudden eddy of astonishment and reflexively I stepped back a little.

"Dinkar, what are you afraid of? There is no one here to bother us! They are all busy with their own stuff!" Priya said reassuringly, still keeping her hands on my shoulders.

"But, Priya! This is a public place! What if those 'culture police' suddenly turn up and start questioning us for immoral acts?" I said trying to push her away gently.

"Dinkar! What world are you living in? What culture police? Who is going to harass us? Romance is our basic right!" Priya came even closer and tried to pacify me.

Unsure, I looked around and saw other couples in various stages of intimacy – some just swaying together with hands around shoulders, some cuddling, and some actually kissing! And to my surprise the couples were of all ages – many young ones, but some older and some really old too! Nobody seemed to be bothered of anyone or anything!

I gathered some courage and surrendered myself in Priya's embrace and proceeded to kiss her on her delicious mouth, and just then I heard the voice of my mother, "Dinu, Dinkar, hey Dinkar!" Her voice was faint at first but it grew louder and louder. Startled, I pushed Priya away and looked around in desperate confusion. *How the hell did my mother come here?*

I blinked and saw the outline of my mother gathering my blankets and saying to me, "Dinkar, get up my dear! It is so late! Don't you have a breakfast meeting with your friends today?"

In utter bewilderment I stared at her and at my room around me, trying to understand what was going on! After allowing me to recover a bit, my mother said, "Girish called. He asked you to take another route to Wadeshwar. Jungli Maharaj road is all dug up for construction!" And then she added, "And yes, take the car. The auto-rickshaw guys are on strike!" And then she muttered, "This country is going to the dogs!"

And then I started hearing noises – our housemaid Rukmini was washing steel pots as if she was playing drums at a rock concert; in the gallery next to my house someone was talking loudly on his cell phone; downstairs in front of our house someone was reversing his car while playing a loud, corrupted, out-of-tune version of Beethoven's Fur Elise!

"Oh God! Oh God! The whole thing was really just a dream then!" A giant wave of depression and disappointment hit me and I was about to slump back into my bed. Just then my phone beeped announcing the arrival of a text message.

"Is his highness awake yet?" It was Priya's text message sparkling on the screen. My sinking heart suddenly felt as if it had just been given a second life and I jumped out of bed.