

Clueless

Thousand Oaks, 1 hour ago

"Joseph, were you attracted to me in college?" Naina suddenly asked.

Joseph was sitting awkwardly at the dining table sipping the tea Naina had made for him. She had curled up comfortably on the sofa just across from the wooden chair on which he was seated. She lay on her left side with her face tilted towards him. She wore a white, laced skirt that flirted with her knees and often slid up whenever she laughed or threw her right hand in the air and exposed an inch or two of her thighs. The light coming through the window behind her created a gentle aura around her face and made it difficult for Joseph to see her face clearly. The light also sharpened her silhouette and made her bare round shoulders and smooth neck glow very prominently. Joseph struggled with the tremendous attraction he felt for her. He had trouble deciding where to focus his eyes.

Naina knew that Joseph was staring at her with barely suppressed admiration and desire, and her mischievous eyes indicated that she was enjoying the attention.



Mysore, India, 19 years ago

Naina had first met Joseph as her instructor for the Discrete Mathematics course. That was at an engineering college in Mysore, India, where Joseph was a young lecturer and Naina was a sophomore in the Electrical Engineering department. She was one in a class of 30 boys and 40 girls, and Joseph might not have noticed her at all if it were not for her initiative. At the end of his very first lecture Naina approached him at the whiteboard. She was impressed with his lecture. He spoke with a lot of energy and passion for his subject. He appeared keen to share his knowledge with his students. Naina, in her youthful eagerness, liked anyone easily, and she had liked him right away.

"That was a great introduction to the course." She said smiling.

"Really? I hope I didn't cram too much!" Joseph said without looking at her, collecting his stuff on the table.

"Oh, no! Not at all! It all seemed quite straightforward, the way you explained it. Do you mind if I come by your office if I have any questions later? My name is Naina."

"Sure. You know my office hours." Joseph replied looking up at Naina finally.

After that first approach there was no way Joseph could have ignored her. Naina made sure she visited him often in his office to check "how she was doing" and pestered him for "challenging homework assignments". She wasn't exactly worried about her performance, but, being of a competitive nature, she always wanted to find ways to do better.

Joseph saw no reason to discourage Naina. Being a young professor with sharp looks, he was used to being accosted by young female students. He rather enjoyed their attention and found it natural that a man of his standing would be pursued by the female species. He often thought about converting some of this attention to his personal gain. He dreamed about giving some of the cute ones private lessons at his apartment. He craved to get initiated in the art of manliness.

Alas, Joseph did not have the courage to do anything like that. He had been brought up in a household that had strict rules of behavior. A house in which the mother had been in charge and held the men at the end of a stick. A house in which the fear of punishment had often been greater than the punishment itself. And so, Joseph was afraid to give in to his natural temptations. He did not have the guts to cross the line in his dealings with the young college women.

Naina was a tall, skinny girl with average looks. She wore plain T-shirts and jeans without exception and did not allow her hair to grow below her shoulders. She wore no make-up and often looked as if she had just come from the gym. She certainly wasn't as attractive as some other girls that cozied up to Joseph.

On his own, Joseph would not have bothered to have anything to do with her, but she made sure their association became stronger over time. Some of her qualities did make her stand out. Unlike many other Indian girls, Naina walked with a straight erect gait and did not hunch her shoulders forward. She was the only student who did not call him "Sir". She recognized that he wasn't much older than her and addressed him by his first name. And she was extremely earnest in every conversation they had.

Naina certainly liked Joseph. He was mature for his age – his replies and comments to her questions did not sound bookish. He was patient with her and rarely showed any irritation, although Naina knew she was perfectly capable of (and indeed known for) irritating anyone. She had the habit of arguing – sometimes about the smallest matters. In the classroom, she would sometimes stand up midway while the instructor was explaining some concept, and object to some minor point with a stubbornness that others found ludicrous. She often found herself talking animatedly in the hallways about something while her classmates stood around laughing at her.

But Joseph did not laugh at her like that. His irritation with her was limited to mild rebukes or polite, rhetorical questions that did not insult her intelligence.

Naina didn't always need mathematics to visit Joseph's office. Sometimes, when there was no mathematics to discuss, Naina would lean back in her metal chair in Joseph's office, glance at the

portraits of various mathematicians taped to the walls, inhale deeply, and bring up some personal matter. It was as if Joseph had suddenly turned into her coffee-shop buddy. Her face would become grave as she narrated stories of her uncle who she lived with.

"He is an irritable tyrant and constantly eggs me to quit college and get married," she said.

Joseph found it odd that she should share such intimate facets of her personal life with him. He had no interest in getting entangled in her private life. He encouraged her not to think too negatively about her folks.

"Parents usually have valid reasons, you know," he would casually counsel her.

"But he is not even my parent! My dad sends money for all my expenses. I just live with my aunt and uncle!" Naina complained.



Thousand Oaks, 1 hour ago

Back in Thousand Oaks, sitting across from Naina and watching her, Joseph was feeling terribly attracted to her. Memories of college days and how he felt then seemed remote and irrelevant.

"Were you attracted to me in college?" Naina repeated the question when she saw Joseph sitting still like a statue.

"Was I attracted to you?" he muttered to himself. "Oh! You mean physically? No, not at all!" he answered. "I was never attracted to you. I was certainly intrigued by your personality, that's all! My interest in you was purely academic."

He hastened to add, "And, of course, I liked you as a student. You were brilliant!"

Naina smiled knowingly. She knew he was lying through his teeth. He was certainly attracted to her. She knew men. They all played games. Even when they squirmed and thrashed about like fish caught on a bait. She often wondered what it was that attracted them to her. Then she remembered Maya Angelou's lines:

*Men themselves have wondered
What they see in me.
They try so much
But they can't touch
My inner mystery.*



Mysore, India, 16 years ago

After finishing college, Naina took up a job with an electronics firm in Bangalore. Till then, her relationship with Joseph had evolved considerably. Joseph's view of her had changed rather simplistically. He continued to enjoy being her mentor. But, purely due to the amount of time they spent together, he had grown attracted to her.

Naina, on her part, had shown no romantic interest in him. She met with him more frequently; she talked with him more and more freely; but not even once did she indicate that she looked at him as anything other than a mentor. A couple of times, Joseph had mustered courage and tried to push matters to the edge by asking her to visit him in his apartment, or to go watch a movie with him. But, Naina had resolutely refused and even commented that those were nutty suggestions coming from a respectable fellow like Joseph!

Once, Naina had accepted Joseph's offer to drop her off at her house and was riding in his car. She sensed that Joseph was worked up about something and was unusually fidgety.

She asked him, "Joseph, is something the matter?"

Joseph glanced at her and said, "Oh, it's nothing. Just ..." and then his voice trailed off.

Naina waited and after a pause, he said, "Naina, sometimes you look so cute that I feel like ..."

Naina smiled and said, "Feel like what?" Joseph replied, "I feel like holding you close to me."

"Oh really! Wow! Joseph, that is so cute."

When Joseph looked at her trying to decipher her reaction, he half-expected her to be grateful for the offer and throw herself into his arms, or at least move closer to him. Instead, he found her smiling, with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. She had in fact moved away an inch and continued to look at him with an amused look. She seemed to be turning the idea in her mind and looking at it from various angles. And then suddenly she moved on to other topics.

Joseph was surprised at this turn of events. It was as if that particular feeling was Joseph's personal matter and he needed to work on it all by himself! It was as if she had taken it as a fatherly compliment and there was nothing to be done about it.

Although disappointed by her lack of interest, Joseph wasn't heartbroken or crestfallen. She wasn't exactly a trophy anyway. He knew there would be other, better girls. Worst case, he would have access to hundreds of pretty women in the arranged marriage market.



Thousand Oaks, 30 minutes ago

Whether Naina was brilliant in college or not, she certainly looked dramatically different today. A bony girl with an oily skin back then, she had now filled up beautifully and her skin glowed like the early morning sky.

Joseph exclaimed, "Naina, you have changed so much! I can't believe the transformation."

"Have I? In what way?" Naina asked bemusedly.

"You just look unbelievably awesome. You have done so well for yourself," Joseph replied.

And indeed Naina had. She now had a stable job, a green card, her own apartment, and a nice little car – all earned through her own hard work. Naina proudly went about listing her achievements. She had always wanted to show Joseph – her college mentor – how she had overcome all kinds of odds and done well for herself.

Naina had always wanted to impress her college mentor. When she had left college to take up a job, she had kept in touch with Joseph – all through his promotions at Mysore, his stint at IIT Kanpur, and even through his permanent move to the University of Iowa in Iowa City. She wrote to him by email – updating him about her progress. She also sent to him her usual questions about career and about "how to advance her standing" in the world. She continued to occasionally grind her grievance against her uncle. She sent an email card when Joseph had got married. She asked him to send photos when his daughter was born.

Their communication had suddenly ground to a halt after her own move to the United States. There was not a word from her for a number of years, and Joseph also made no attempt to look her up. When Naina had just about entered a most exciting and life-transforming phase of her life, Joseph had got busy pursuing his own fortunes.



Iowa City, 12 years ago

Joseph had, during this time, become an accomplished man in every sense. He was a full professor at the University of Iowa. His recent work in Statistical Methods for Verifying Program Correctness had generated a healthy following for him in the academic community. He no longer had to slog alone as a teacher and had four assistants to help. His research team had grown thanks to the funding from the Intelligence Agency. He was generally recognized as a minor celebrity at social events of the Indian American community.

Joseph also had a happy and loving family. His daughter showed the promise of following in her dad's footsteps towards a career in mathematics. She had recently been chosen to represent her school in the international math Olympiad. Joseph had a great bond with his daughter and was her friend, philosopher, and guide even for certain delicate matters that usually plague young good-looking teenagers. Joseph's wife, Maria, couldn't care less for mathematics, but, like a loyal fan, she enjoyed watching the father-daughter duo discussing complex numbers and 3-D geometry. She took it upon herself to excel in her supporting role as a homemaker.

Joseph had few complaints about his present station in life. He couldn't imagine there was anything more to be accomplished to be hailed as a successful man.



Iowa City, 1 month ago

"Hi Joseph, do you remember me?" the voice on the phone asked.

"Naina?" Joseph was startled by the sound of his own name as if he had heard it for the first time. Naina sounded very different, but he had instantly recognized the earnest voice which had been Naina's hallmark all through their interaction.

Naina, without any preliminaries, straightaway asked him, "Joseph, I have a great idea. It has been so long. I don't want to talk on the phone like this. Why don't you visit me in Thousand Oaks? I have a nice little apartment, and I really want to catch up with you in person."

This offer was so sudden and unprecedented that Joseph became confused, surprised, and even bewildered. This was probably the first time in his life that a woman had proposed to meet him alone.

"Joseph, there is so much I want to share with you. I am a totally different person now. And, you know what? I am still single. I can give you complete undivided attention," Naina had continued.

So, Naina had finally come around. Joseph felt vindicated. His mental processes had already started working energetically to figure out a way to visit Naina alone in her little apartment.

"I can't just hop on a plane and come to LA you know! I have teaching engagements, family to look after." Joseph protested, although he knew darn well he was going to hop on that plane as soon as possible.

"I know Joseph that you are a married man and have other duties. But, come on, we are old friends. Can you not give just one day to your friend?" Naina's voice betrayed no trace of annoyance or irritation. It was just the plain old stubbornness that was so characteristic of Naina.

Arranging the trip had been easy. There were always conferences going on in all parts of the world that would interest a mathematician like Joseph. He had located one such conference in downtown LA after Christmas break and booked himself on it. The rest of it was straightforward. Within a couple of weeks of Naina's phone call, Joseph had landed at LAX airport. He walked with his backpack out through baggage claim and waited for Naina at the passenger pick-up point. He was still in a state of utter confusion mixed with excitement and a curious anticipation.

Joseph's fall from his high, mentor's seat was complete when he finally saw Naina. When she stepped out of her car to shake his hand, he was astounded by her new appearance. Her face looked as fresh as a college graduate's, her body as stunning as a model's and her smile brimming with tremendous self-confidence. And yet, by his calculations, she was clearly in her late thirties.

She took him straight to her apartment, and throughout that day she stayed by his side. Throughout the day, her phone did not ring, and she made no calls. She offered him tea and snacks that she herself had prepared. She treated him with utmost affection and tenderness.

"Joseph, I am so happy you came," she kept repeating.



Thousand Oaks, Now

For Joseph, time passed very quickly in Naina's company. While inside her apartment, he sat most of the time shifting in his seat and just watching Naina with admiration and amazement. He was hypnotized. It was as if she exuded a great force and held him in its thrall. He could not remember a time in his life when he had encountered such terrific female power at such close quarters.

He could not tell what it was that fascinated him about her. Was it her story, her achievements, her present station in life, or her physical beauty? Or was it her close proximity, her friendliness, her hospitality? It was possibly a mix of all this and much more. Joseph was incapable of grasping.

Naina narrated to him her story. She talked while they sat in her apartment. She talked when they took a short walk outside to a nearby garden and back. She talked while she fixed sandwiches for both of

them. She narrated how she had struggled with friends and foes to build her career and an independent existence. And while she talked Joseph watched her.

Joseph caught bits and pieces of her story. He found it much easier to watch her movements, inhale the fragrance of her body as she floated by, admire her youthfulness. At times, he felt a crushing urge to get up and kiss her or hold her tightly in his arms. Once, when she spread a blanket on the carpet and lay down with her face tilted towards him by her hand, he even thought of dropping himself beside her.

“Why didn’t you keep in touch with me after coming to the US?” Joseph asked.

He certainly felt guilty now, that he had not tried to locate Naina, and that a lot of precious time had been wasted.

“I did eventually, didn’t I?” Naina said, smiling, “It was me who called you. You were so busy and happy in your cozy life you couldn’t care less for what had happened to me.”

As Naina lay on the sofa describing her story and Joseph sat on the wooden chair watching her hungrily, the day grew old, and the light shifted lower in the windows. Joseph got extremely restless. He had sat there on the dining chair and watched the fabulous Naina for a long time, and he was just boiling inside like stew on fire. But he did not know what to do. A lifetime of inaction and ineptitude kept him tied to his chair. He began hoping that Naina would take some initiative. After all, wasn’t she smiling at him? She had surely noticed what was happening to him. Hadn’t she planned all this?

Naina, after her initial amusement, had grown concerned at Joseph’s reaction. She was certainly hoping to impress Joseph in this meeting; indeed, she had felt Joseph was one person who would truly appreciate what she had achieved. But his worsening physical condition was rather unexpected and alarming. The poor fellow certainly looked as if he might fall ill any moment.

Finally, she rose and came close to him and sat in the chair next to him. She looked at him gravely, with concern, and said, “Joseph, I understand what you are thinking. I cannot give you what you want.”

Having uncorked the lid of Joseph’s pressure cooker, she paused and watched Joseph’s condition grow critical. His eyes reddened with a mixture of irritation and desire. He decided not to go into denial. “Naina, you have everything else. But you are alone. Lonely! You need it more than me.”

“And this is a free country. No one cares!” he continued in a reassuring tone.

Naina smiled and said, “That is so typical. Joseph, you are right. I am alone. Probably lonely too! And, yes, I am a free woman in this free country. But you have no idea what that means to me, do you?”

Joseph waited with mock patience.

“Joseph, I have changed. I no longer believe in any old-fashioned views on how I should live. And I will tell you honestly. I know how much fun it is to be with a man. But I also know what kind of man I want. And you are not it!”

Joseph’s irritation grew. “What’s wrong with me?”

And then he continued, “Oh, I know! You don’t want me because I am married! And you say you are not old-fashioned!” His voice seethed with sarcasm.

Naina sighed and walked away from Joseph. “See, you don’t really understand me at all! Why did I even invite you to meet me alone even though I knew you were married? Your marriage is of no concern to me. I care more about love than loyalty.”

She placed her mug on the table and continued, “I invited you because I wanted to show you how I was doing, since you have been my mentor for so long. I used to like you a lot. You have seen me struggle through so many phases. I thought you might be able to truly appreciate who I have become today. I thought that we had a connection between us. But, after meeting you today I realize that we are further apart than we were ever before. I see that you see me only as a physically desirable woman, nothing more!”

Joseph realized he was losing the battle fast. He grew belligerent. “Then why did you take the risk of meeting me alone like this? I can still get what I want!”

“If you do that, you will not have Naina but a rubber doll without any emotion or desire. You will get no pleasure out of it. But, yes, I took that risk because I respected you as my mentor. I see now that you have the monster in you as well. I wonder: did you ever see me as a person? Or was I always just a female?” Naina said without a shade of fear in her voice. She in fact came back and sat next to Joseph.

Joseph was startled at Naina’s frank and fearless response.

He knew he could not stoop to such a step. “Naina, please, stop! Don’t say such things. I will not do any such thing,” Joseph said weakly. His desire had shriveled to nothingness.

She continued, “You come here and see that I am single and attractive. Then you think I am available. You see no need for any preliminaries like love and understanding. You think I would come running to you because of our past acquaintance. You don’t understand me at all. I live alone because I love my independence. I am alone because I got rid of the idiots who started telling me how to run my life.”

Naina stopped her onslaught, seeing that Joseph had hung his head low, sullen. She let her words float in the air for a while, let them sink in.

She bent forward slightly as if to console him, “Joseph, don’t be discouraged. I know you are not a monster. You are just spoiled. You are used to getting things easy in life. You never had to work hard

to earn the love of a woman. Take the trouble to understand who I am today. Learn to respect me for what I have achieved. Learn to love me. Make me fall in love with you. And then magic will happen between us. But there is no magic between us today.”

“Yes, you are right!” Joseph mumbled weakly.

The fear had been there inside him throughout the day that Naina might elude him once again. That fear was confirmed now. And once again, he was clueless. He felt like a small preschool child sitting in front of a learned teacher whose wisdom he could not fathom.

“Well then, take your backpack and get going. You will miss your flight. Take a cab to the airport.” Naina got up and said.

Joseph rose reluctantly. “Am I a bad person, Naina?” he asked weakly.

“Of course not. You are reacting to your impulses. And I must obey my instincts.” Naina said softly.

Joseph was astonished at Naina’s superior thinking and emotional maturity. She had come a long way indeed, he thought.

Naina came close, and as Joseph extended his hand apologetically to shake hers, she pulled him to her and embraced him gently. She held his head to her chest and patted him gently for a couple of seconds.

Joseph’s primitive hope sprang its ugly head again and he said, “Naina, listen, you will never meet the kind of man you deserve ...”

Naina cut him short and pushed him out of the door, “Grow up Joseph! Why don’t you hire me as your mentor! I will repay you handsomely for all your past mentorship.” And she closed the door in his face.



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