

It's You!



ANIL

short stories by  
**Subhashish Bhadra**

*It's You!*

**By Subhashish Bhadra**

**To my friends. I love you.**

I still remember the terrible fear I felt when I set foot in Delhi for the first time. Honestly, I had never seen such crowds before; there was barely any space to walk at the railway station. The look of quite confidence on the faces of those around me made me all the more nervous. In fact, even the porters who came forward to carry my luggage intimidated me. I had been told not to trust anybody in the city. I didn't trust the porter with my luggage that day; and I now wish I had heeded my mother's advice while I was in college too.

Now that I look back at the years in college from the comfort of my home, I feel I have conquered that nervousness, but I'm not sure what has replaced it – Indifference? Anger? Condescendence? I remember the tagline of the movie, *The Namesake*, which said that the greatest journeys are those that bring you home. Well, I'd like to add that they're often also the most painful. Because one returns home only when all other doors are closed, because home is the only place that never shuts its doors.

I recollect the amazed look on my classmates' faces when I told them about my family – the parents, siblings, uncles and aunts, a dozen cousins, grandparents, and family servants, all living in the same house. My background was more alien to them than theirs was to me. My father and his brothers run a local furniture business in my town. The money is just enough to take care of everybody's comforts, and a bit extra is saved for business investments. Childrens' education at my home is treated like an investment and hence is drawn from

the common pool of money. In that context, my coming to Delhi was a big financial drain for the entire family. I don't think my uncles and aunts were quite pleased about it. After all, they were partially paying for my education, while their own children were studying in my town's lackluster schools and colleges. But granddad, himself illiterate, was proud of the fact that someone in the family was going to study outside home for the first time, and so he put his foot down. With the admission and hostel offers in my hand, and a few hundred rupees in my pocket, I boarded the train from Gorakhpur to Delhi.

A Delhiite would probably never understand the magnitude of the scenic riches he sees every day. Ask me! On the way from the station to college, I crossed monuments of great historical significance that I have only read about in textbooks – the Red Fort, Rajghat and all. Not that I was dying to see these monuments, yet to see them in front of my eyes for the first time was surreal. I don't think I can put that feeling into words here, so I'll leave it as an exercise to you. Close your eyes, and imagine yourself in a place; a city that you've only heard of, or watched on the television. Imagine yourself in the midst of people who're totally different from you. Imagine yourself being alone in a crowd. That's how it felt that day.

College, though, was not quite different from school. I had no friends in school, and that was broadly how college was. Go to classes, eat, sleep, study, eat, sleep – that was my college

life in a nutshell. At that time, I don't think anybody outside of my class knew that I existed. In the midst of the renowned debaters, dramatic actors, macho sportspersons and creative whiz-kids, I was a nobody. Not that I was complaining – anonymity was my defense mechanism against the loneliness. There were a few days that I cried in my hostel room. But once the alarm rang in the morning, I went about my work with robotic precision. Until that one day.

It was sometime towards the end of my first year at college. I was sitting in the library, going over my class notes to prepare for an upcoming test.

'Hey!'

I was startled. I turned and saw Anjali, my classmate, standing right behind me.

'Oh ... Hi ...' I sputtered.

'You *actually* make those notes while in class?'

'Yes ... No ... In room, after class, too'

'Wow. I'm going to get them photocopied some day. You're done preparing for the test?'

By that time, I was beginning to regain some coherence in my sentences. 'No, there's still some studying to do' I said.

‘Oh. Carry on, then. We should catch up sometime soon’ she said, as turned around and walked out of the library.

Don’t get me wrong, I wasn’t a creep who’d get happy when a girl talks to him. Not that I took much note of this conversation. I just remember it now, in hindsight. I was impressed by Anjali’s forced familiarity – we had never talked to each other, and yet she began a conversation as if we’d known each other well enough. True to her word, she took my notes a week later and got them photocopied, after which I became an overnight sensation. Almost everyone in class got a copy of my notes, and suddenly people started taking notice of the fact that I existed. Gradually, most of my classmates became my ‘hi-hello’ friends.

The next time I talked to Anjali was during the exams. Among the few who knew me, I was notorious for sleeping at nine every night. I was lying under the comfort of my blanket when my phone suddenly vibrated. I reached out for my phone from under my blanket, and saw a message from her. For your convenience, I’ll reproduce that conversation here:

‘Hey. Sleeping?’

-> No. Tell me?

‘Are you done with chapter 8?’

-> Yes.

‘How do you solve the question on page 163?’

-> (I got out of bed, took out the book and checked what question she was referring to) Make the interest rate endogenous in the system of equations. Then solve the equations for money demand.

'Okay. Thank You.'

I went back to bed. After a couple of minutes, the phone vibrated, and it was her again. This time, I put the phone on silent and went back to sleep. I don't think she was offended, or at the very least, she didn't show it the next day.

Such intermittent texting continued for the remaining exams. After the last exam, while I was on my way back to my hostel room to pack, she called me out.

'Hey Anil! Wait'.

I turned around, and I saw her running towards me, holding her books in one hand, and settling her hair with the other.

'Just wanted to say thank you for clearing my doubts.'

By now, I'd got accustomed talking to her, and the sputtering of the past was gone. 'Not a problem'.

'You're a sweetheart! Stay in touch during the holidays?' she said as she came forward and hugged me.

This was that moment that was transformational. Again, don't take me for a conservative creep, but it was slightly awkward for me to be hugged by a girl. Suddenly, I felt this bonding with her, and it gave some context to our intermittent conversations earlier. I don't think she remembers this incident, and I now wish I'd told her how special it was for me. Was I in love then? Perhaps not. But finally, I felt I had a friend.

Then came the summer break, and the total lack of contact between us. Over the two months, I texted her twice, asking her whereabouts. She didn't reply once. I was slightly angry with her at this point, and when I returned to college after the break, I'd decided to not talk to her ever. If only!

When I saw Anjali in class after that, I was pleasantly surprised. She had put on spectacles, was wearing Indian clothing and, I suppose, had lost some weight. Somehow, she looked much fairer too. That was perhaps the first time I felt my heart melting. She looks absolutely adorable in specs!

I don't remember talking to her for a few months. It might be that we talked and I don't remember it now. The next time I remember talking to her was during a department trip to Nainital that month. I was sitting in the bus, alone as always. She came and sat next to me.

'Hey! It's been a long time since we talked'.

I didn't know whether to bring up the fact that I had *tried to talk*, at least. I didn't. I just nodded. Looking back, I probably should have. I should have let her know what I like, and what I don't. It would have saved a lot of pain for me; and her.

'Why don't you join us at the back?'

'Okay.'

We got up and went to the back of the bus, where the gregarious guys of my class were. They were slightly surprised at me joining them. Anjali went right in the middle of the group, while I took a seat in one corner. Then, for the next hour or so, the group went about discussing movies, teachers, hill stations, gadgets, food ... they went on and on and on. I didn't participate – neither was I interested in the senseless chatter, nor did I have anything to contribute. So I got up and went back to my seat in the front, closed my eyes and tried to sleep.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Anjali.

'Hey, why'd you get up?' she asked, as she sat down next to me.

Now, this was seriously unusual for me. Firstly, someone actually noticed that I had got up was one. But someone cared to ask *why* I got up was another thing altogether.

'I don't like to talk nonsense' I said sheepishly.

Anjali started laughing. I didn't feel mocked; so I smiled with her. 'I can understand. Even I sometimes get tired of talking with these guys' she said.

'Then why do you?' I asked.

'Well. Firstly, because I don't know what else to do in this time; and secondly, because I need to talk to someone to understand whether I can be friends with him or her'.

I think I had paused a bit to contemplate on what she said. 'Okay, and have you found friends this way?'

'Yes. Not as many as I'd want to, though'. And she smiled again. This was the first time she smiled around me, or perhaps the first time I noticed. I've seen all sorts of smiles from the forced to the instantaneous. Her smile was somewhere in between. It seemed to say to me 'I have no choice but to take everything lightly'. I felt that there was something deeper that the smile was trying to cover for. Being myself, I wanted to find out.

'Your smile looks forced' I blurted.

'What! Where did that come from?' she said, surprised.

'You seem to be forcing yourself to be happy'

'We all do. Don't we?' she said, as she smiled again.

'Not me'

'Then that's good' she said 'Someday, tell me the secret to your happiness. When I ask for it'.

Then she ended the topic there. We talked for some time, about our lives. I came to know that she'd studied in one of the posh South Delhi schools, and stayed somewhere in the northern parts of the city. She joined college because she had no better option (yes, that made me feel insulted). She told me about what she likes – butterscotch, roses, history among others. I think that was the day when we became friends. Today, I don't know whether to regret that conversation. It started a beautiful phase, and it laid the seeds for a bad phase. A really bad one.

Over the trip and then through the rest of the winter, we became good friends. We started visiting places together. On my birthday, she sneaked into my hostel room while I was away and decorated it. She also got me a cake that she'd made herself. Trust me, I'd never felt so loved before, and I've never felt so loved again. Oh, and this one time I accompanied her to her friends' party and she made me drink alcohol for the first time in life; the less be said about her driving while on the way back, the better. Then there was this time when we went to this shady cinema hall, where

we'd to pick up parts of the seat, put them back on, and then sit down to watch the movie. I miss those days now. I read somewhere that friendship is not a big thing, it is a million small things; and if anything epitomizes that, it is Anjali and my friendship. In a way, she was my bulwark against the world – my only friend. Perhaps more than a friend.

I forgot to mention a little complication in our story. Anjali had a boyfriend, Avijit. They had been dating since they were in school together, and even though Avijit went to Kanpur to study engineering, they decided to continue their relationship. Every day, I saw the dedication that Anjali had for Avijit – she'd talk to him for hours on end, sneak out of classes to meet him whenever he was in Delhi, send food for him whenever anybody she knew went to Kanpur. Not that it mattered to me or to her. As she said on several occasions, she felt more attached to me than to her boyfriend.

Did I feel jealous of Avijit? I'd be lying if I said no. But I've never been able to figure out what exactly it was that I was jealous of. Anjali made me feel so special that I wonder if she ever did that much for Avijit. I got to be around her everyday; Avijit didn't. I felt like I had a special connection with her; perhaps I was just uncomfortable with the fact that everything between us was in the gray zone – not discussed, not clarified, but allowed to go on.

For example, one day I was dropping her back home after watching a movie.

'Anil, things aren't going too good with Avi' she'd said, looking blankly ahead.

'Did you guys end up fighting again?'

'Not quite ... Maybe yes, yaar ... I don't see the point in this anymore'

'But you love him a lot, don't you?'

'I do; and I know he loves me too. But how long can I carry on with all this drama?'

'Why do you guys fight if you love each other so much?'

'Everyone's not like you na, Anil. There are simply so many expectations – call these many times a day, do this, don't hang out with so-and-so ... I'm just so frustrated'.

I think I could see tears in her eyes that night; it was dark, so I'm not too sure. Over the next few weeks, there were several instances where she told me she'd just fought with Avijit over something. I know break-ups keep happening all the time, but it's something different when it happens at such close quarters. Somehow, her problems seemed to be taking more out of her than I'd have expected. Way more.

It was within one month of my dad buying me a new phone that she suddenly messaged one fine evening.

'I can't take it, Anil. He's just so rude'

-> What happened?

'Don't ask. I'm broken ... ttyl'

-> Wait. Tell me. What happened.

She didn't reply. I've never understood how it's so easy for her to not reply, and I feel guilty today for never telling her how irritated it makes me feel. But that evening, I was concerned. Really concerned.

I took the first auto I could find, and without bargaining (something of a rarity for me), I rushed to her house. I rang the bell, her mom opened the door, and I asked her if I could meet Anjali. Aunty took me to Anjali's room, and knocked on the door. Anjali opened the door, and let me in. I could see that she'd been crying. At that moment, I didn't want to know what had happened or how I could help her; I just wanted to be there with her.

I sat beside her on the bed for half an hour. Finally, I asked her 'do you want to go for a walk outside?'

'I guess'

We went outside, and I took her to the nearest ice-cream stand I could see. I bought her a butterscotch shake, and

myself a chocolate one. We quietly finished the shakes, and walked back to her house. As she entered the house, she turned around and said 'thank you'. I smiled, in the way Anjali used to smile earlier. The bitter-sweet one.

I didn't see Anjali for the next two weeks. My calls went unanswered and texts not replied to. More importantly, I began to miss her. It felt like there was a void in my life. Yes, a lot more people now talked to me, but all those friendships felt just superficial. I had seen Anjali through good times and the bad, and that is what made me feel so attached to her. This was already the middle of the final year, and I was anyway anxious that we'd be separated at the end of college.

Till one day, she finally showed up in class. She was back to wearing casual clothing, the spectacles were gone and a smile was back; not the same one that I adored, but one that was even more radiant. She came straight to me that day.

'I'm sorry I didn't call back' she said, sitting on the seat next to me.

'It's fine. I was just concerned. How've you been?'

'Better. Much, much better. Avi and I went to Udaipur to give this one more shot. Mom and dad don't know, of course'.

I felt a strong feeling boiling within me. Avijit got to spend two entire weeks with Anjali? What did he do to deserve

*that?* Nonetheless, I was just happy to see Anjali back, and happy.

'You tell. How've you been?' she asked.

'Good. Was missing you'.

She laughed at that, loud enough for the rest of the class to look back at her. Seriously, what made her laugh? For the first time in my life, I summoned enough courage to be able to tell someone that I missed her, and she just laughed it away! It's my habit to make my life melodramatic, and in that context, this was surely the beginning of the end.

Immediately after class, she rushed outside. I followed her till the gate, finally catching up with her.

'Where are you going?'

'Avi is here for another couple of days. I'm going to meet him. Bbye'. She came forward, hugged me, and left.

Over the next couple of days, she left as soon as classes got over to meet Avijit. You'd probably think that this is a familiar get-jealous-of-boyfriend story. It isn't. I was perfectly fine waiting for Avijit to go back to Kanpur, and for Anjali and I to return to how we were.

But things weren't the same even after he left, or perhaps it was just me being me. We used to hang out together almost as often as before, but in bigger groups now. I always felt uncomfortable with her asking me to come with her to meet X or Y or both. I didn't want to, and I made it clear to her one day when she asked me to come with her to a party.

'I can't.'

'But why?' she asked me on the phone.

'It will get late at night and I'll not find autos'

'I'll drop you, don't worry' she said.

'It'll be unsafe to drive back so late at night'.

'I'll manage. I'll talk to mom. Please come?'

'No. I have to study too.'

'Fine. Do whatever!' she said as she kept the phone.

My natural response to trouble has always been to put myself back in a cocoon – the cocoon I came from. I'd been told beware of city people, to not trust them. I probably started doing a bit too much of that in the days following that conversation. Anjali and I didn't talk to each other, I became extremely irritable around others, and got into frequent

arguments. I took to facebook like a cockroach would to darkness. My poetic juices overflowed as I write one poem after the other in 'memory' of our friendship. Till one day, it finally caught her attention. Does that mean I did all of it for her attention? Perhaps.

The day before the first test of the final examinations, she texted me.

'Was reading your poems'.

-> So?

'You seem depressed'

-> So?

'What's wrong, Anil? Why're you doing this to me?'

-> I'm doing nothing to you. I have no problem with you.

'I can see it in your poems'

I'd felt repulsed by her then. If she cared for me so much, she'd have talked to me long back, perhaps not done those very things that irritated me. I didn't want her to know what I was up to; in fact, I wanted her to have nothing to do with my life.

So I went switched on my laptop, went to facebook and dropped a message to her:

i have blocked all ur contacts and am unfriending you. because it only gives me pain and tears now. i cant do anything but

run away to avoid the pain as its getting unbearable.

Un-friending her on facebook, although juvenile, was more symbolic than anything else. I wanted to cut that last bond that connected me to her.

The next day, after the test, she came running towards me.

'Anil, we need to talk' she said.

'I don't want to' I said, as I paced ahead of her. She didn't try to catch up. Looking back, I'm not sure if I wanted her to come running behind me. I obviously felt betrayed that she didn't try hard enough; but I also felt irritated by her voice, her presence.

The night before the final exam, I had the sudden realization that it would all be over the next day; and I felt cheated that she had moved on much earlier than I did. I think I wanted her to respond to me at any cost. However, at that time, I felt that it was just the end of the world, and I had nothing else to look forward to.

I look out the scissors, and began carving her name on my right hand. I started at the wrist. The 'A' was the most painful, also because it took the most time. The blood came pouring out of the 'A', and I though I feel ashamed of it today, at that point I'd felt a certain level of machismo. I felt

fearless. Then I went ahead to write the other alphabets. Trust me, it was really, really painful. By the time I reached 'J', I could feel myself passing out due to the loss of blood. But I continued.

Finally, when her entire name was etched on my body from wrist to elbow, I took out my phone, clicked a photo of it and sent it to her.

I waited for her response. Five minutes, ten, fifteen, thirty, forty-five. I checked the phone again. No reply. I texted her again – 'Happy now? You have caused me so much pain!'

She still didn't reply.

I was feeling sleepy due to the loss of blood, and I dozed off with the mobile still in my hand. When I got up in the morning, the blood had coagulated around the name and made it even more visible.

I washed off the blood with water, but the name was still visible. That day, despite the summer heat, I wore a full-sleeve t-shirt to the exam, to hide the cut marks.

In the exam hall, she was sitting right behind me. I kept looking at her, waiting for her to ask me why I cut myself, just like she'd once asked me why I got up in the bus. But she didn't. At the end of the exam, she got up and left immediately, as if she was trying to avoid me.

I followed her.

After walking a bit, she turned back. She had tears in her eyes, and her eyes were bloodshot.

‘Listen, Anil. I’ve had enough of this! Simply enough! I can’t take it anymore!’

I was startled. I tried to speak, but couldn’t. Neither did I have anything to say, nor did she let me.

‘First I thought it was just Avi, and that you’d be this pillar of support I could always fall back on. Then you suddenly started behaving like a psycho. What the hell is wrong with you?’

‘I .... I ....’

‘You know what, I just don’t care what’s wrong with you. Please Anil, if I’ve ever meant something to you, just go away’.

That was the last I saw of her. The exams went well, I topped, got a job in Mumbai and came back home to Gorakhpur one last time before the job starts.

I’m going to leave for Mumbai in another week or so, but my mind is still stuck at that last image of Anjali, and thoughts of

how different life could have been. What if I'd never met her? What if I'd not visited her home the night she was distraught? What if I'd talked to her when she was trying to make contact?

As I'm readying to move to Mumbai, I fear the big city people even more. The big city people – so superficial; as transient as ripples in a pond. Cunning and self-centered. I turned out to be too naïve to understand it. I got swayed. I indeed got swayed. I gave Anjali more than myself, I searched for happiness in her. I have grown up in a joint family, missed a very vital element here, which I tried to search for in her.

Once in a while, I do sit back and think whether I gave her a fair chance. Did I bury our friendship under the hubris of expectations? Did I ever try to understand that she needed her space, and that perhaps I was trying to 'possess' her? Did I drop the curtain of my ego to listen to her? Did I, even once, consider the possibility of me being wrong? But with all my pent up anger, I brush these questions aside.

Sometimes, it's better to let go. I just wish her a happy way ahead, with a request not to play with anyone else's emotions ever. Well, in the end, I thank her, for teaching me about players in this stage, about the acts in the stage. Thanks! Curtains!