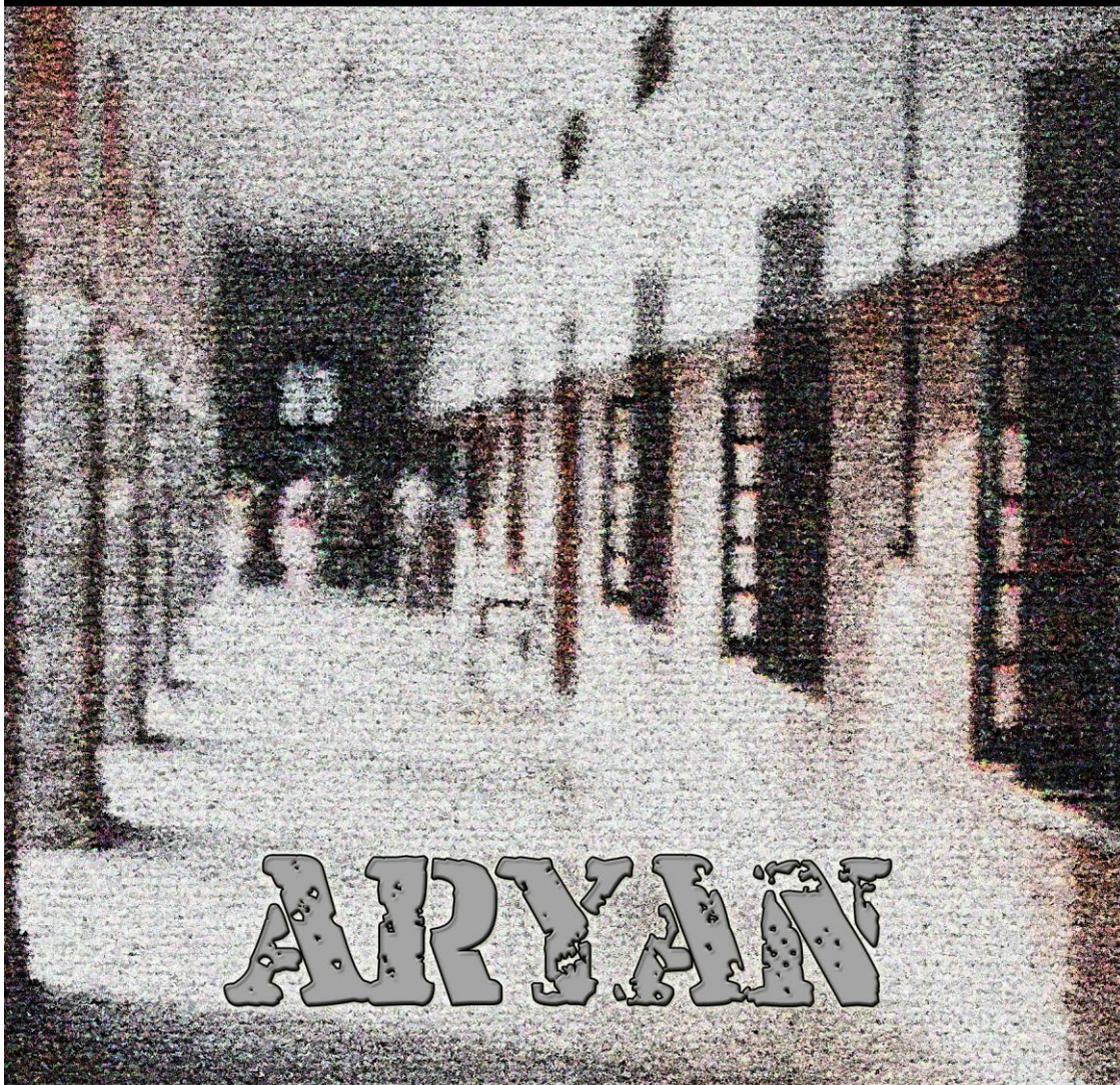


It's You!



ARYAN

short stories by
Subhashish Bhadra

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Those who say that it's lonely at the top probably haven't been there. There are enough people attracted by the glitz and glamour of success who will give you company once you reach there. It is the path to success, the path of somebody else's shattered dreams, which is lonely. Reaching the top implies that you left someone behind. I've been on that path, and I am still haunted by how everything in my life was sacrificed at the altar of success. There are blood and tears on the hands of the victory.

It all began at the end of our first year in college. It was late at night, and the three of us were on our way back from dinner at a nearby *dhaba*. Vivek, Saurav and I – we stayed in the same hostel block, and had become the best of friends. We were united both in our joys of independence and the sorrows of barely edible mess food. My childhood had been a fairly lonely one, where my only friends were friends at school. To now have not one, but two friends who shared every aspect of your life, was something like a dream come true. As an illustration, we'd shared the same bed and had candle-light dinners over a week (however, to put it in context, this followed load shedding in college).

Anyway, getting back to that night. Saurav's phone beeped.

"Hey guys, the annual list of scholarships is up on the notice board" he announced.

"And?" I asked.

“Sonali said she’d to rush somewhere so she didn’t see the entire list. But apparently Vivek’s name is there for sure.”

“Had to be! The old man adores him” I said half in jest.

“Those scholarships are a joke. More like consolation at the end of the year, a balm for our bruised egos” Vivek said philosophically.

“Whatever, dude. I hope I’ve got one. Last thing I want is for everyone to have scholarships on their CV and not me” Saurav said, tensed “I’m catching a rickshaw to college. You guys coming?”

There’s rule no. 1 of my college life. Never say no to a rickshaw ride somebody else pays for. All three of us got on the rickshaw and made our way to college. While Saurav was evidently anxious, clasping his hands together in some sort of a prayer, my heart was beating fast too. I’m sure you know how it feels, when you open the website that has your results. I experienced the same feeling of trepidation that night.

When we reached college, we ran to the notice board, then frantically looked for the department’s list. Saurav started to read it from the top, and I from the end.

“There’s Vivek. For best academic performance” Saurav declared “Kalyani, Roshni ...”

“... Arushi for contribution to college’s cultural life ...” he exclaimed “... are you kidding me? Did she even contribute to the room next door?”

We guys laughed momentarily in those tense moments.

“Hey Saurav, here’s your name. For involvement in classrooms ...” Vivek said “... ha ha. I think we all know which one of the teachers would’ve recommended your name. You sure as hell are involved with her!”

This time, I didn’t laugh. I began to panic. I couldn’t find my name on the list. Like true best buddies, Vivek and Saurav noticed my anxiousness and began searching for my name.

“I’m sure it’s somewhere here. We must’ve missed it” Saurav said.

It was one of those empty and baseless assurances that get onto your nerves. I felt irritated, and I’m sure you’ve felt it too, when things are going wrong, and your friend says ‘I’m sure it’ll be all right.’ If only!

After a few minutes of searching in vain, Vivek said “Dude, I’m sure there’s a mistake. We’ll go talk to the old man tomorrow.”

“No, yaar, it’s fine ...” I said, holding back the disappointment
“... next year.”

“Let’s go and at least talk to him once? Maybe the clumsy office guys forgot to print all the scholarships?” Vivek said.

By this point, I had to try hard to keep my irritation capped.
“Listen, guys. No point stretching this. I’m really happy for you guys, but if my name isn’t there, it just isn’t; and we can’t do anything about that. This place depresses me now – let’s go to the block.”

On the way, nobody spoke a word. Just as we entered the block, Saurav said “Hey. Do you guys want to go sit in the café for some time? I don’t mind coffee.”

“You don’t drink coffee after dinner. Don’t force yourself to be nice. Listen, Saurav, I’m just fine. Let me be alone for some time and I’ll carry a smile to class. I promise” I said.

I went back to my room, changed clothes and immediately got into bed. With the benefit of hindsight, I can say that such trivial things didn’t make much of a difference to either one’s life or one’s career. But who would explain that to a young, agitated and impressionable guy I was back then. It took me a long time to go to sleep that night. I kept thinking about how I’d go to class the next day, how I’ll face the other guys in class; I was even worried how I’ll face Vivek and

Saurav the next day. Today, it is funny how seriously I took the incident, at that time I'd been frightened about my future.

Sleep makes me forget most of my tensions. When I woke up the next day, the anxiety was gone. Also, 'facing' my classmates wasn't either tough or awkward, except the moments when the scholarship awardees were being congratulated by the others. One thing that did happen was that I started paying more attention in class, just to be sure that I don't lose out on future faculty-decided awards.

Fate gave me enough hints that it doesn't matter. During the two-day internship interviews later that summer, I was the first person to get an internship, that too with the most reputed firm. At the end of the first day, I was the hero, even though about half my class, Saurav included, had got obtained internships. Vivek hadn't. After a tiring day of interviews, we all headed to a restaurant for dinner.

"What a tiring day, yaar!" Kalyani said, as we sat down in the restaurant.

"Tiring and satisfying" I added "I was shit scared in the afternoon, though."

"Right! Given what you told us about how your first round was, I was sure they were going to take you" Saurav said "I'm

just happy I got something to do for the summer. I would've killed myself if I had to sit idle at home."

Arushi nudged him, and pointed towards Vivek, who was sitting silently at the corner.

"What?" Saurav exclaimed "Vivek's a stud, and today an aberration. He's going to get something better than all of us tomorrow, I can bet on that!"

"I don't care anymore" Vivek finally said "It's just that sitting through these interviews is so tiring that I would always want to get the first job and get done with it."

"If only Aryan would let you get it!" Poorva said "If you weren't friends, I'm sure you would've been at each other's throats."

I don't think many people spoke for the rest of the dinner. What was better left unsaid had finally been said. You can be the best of friends, but when it's a matter of your careers, everyone's on their own, and when it is your best friend who is your competitor-in-chief, friendship is more a nuisance than a help.

I never understood how Saurav never agreed to these things. He spent a few hours that night practicing interviews with Vivek. "He's really good, we all know that. Just that he's not

able to articulate himself well enough” Saurav told me in class the next day, while Vivek was away giving interviews.

By the end of the day, I could’ve killed Saurav. Not only did Vivek get an internship, he got an offer from a new company that paid more than mine did.

“See guys, I told you! This guy’s a stud!” Saurav said in the college mess that night.

“Relax, dude. No big deal. New company, less competition. It was bound to happen” Vivek said. Ah, the false modesty! I’m sure he was jumping within, having got the highest pay that year.

“What will you do with all that money? How much is it anyway?” Kalyani asked.

“Forty thousand a month. More than double the next highest” Saurav said.

“Stop licking his boots, dude” I said, abruptly.

“What?” he exclaimed.

I had to cover up my frustration now “It’s been two days, and I’m really tired with all this internship talk. Let’s not discuss it right now?”

“Fine” Saurav said.

I disliked Saurav for being a yes-man. He didn't seem to have his own identity, his own ambitions and preferences. At the same time, I respected his dedication towards Vivek and me. Just like he'd helped Vivek with his interviews, Saurav helped me several time before the exams, given that I had had to miss several classes due to my extracurricular pursuits.

One question always troubled me, though – if Saurav had to make a choice between helping only one of Vivek and me, who would he choose? A glimpse of an answer came after a few weeks when we had planned to go for a movie.

“Guys, it's too hot outside” Vivek said after classes that afternoon “I don't think we should go today.”

“Dude, the mall will be air-conditioned. Don't be a killjoy” Saurav said.

“No, yaar, it's not about the mall. Just that it's so far that we'd get burnt in the sun. Why don't we go to the hall nearby? It also works out much cheaper.”

“This one's not even air-conditioned” I said.

“Yeah. But it has enough fans; and it's so close” he pleaded.

“We’ll catch one of those AC buses to the mall na” Saurav reasoned.

“And wait in this heat for one of those rare AC buses to come?” Vivek said mockingly.

“Fine! I guess the movie’s more important than where we watch it. Let’s go to that dingy little place” Saurav said.

I felt extremely offended. “You guys carry on. I don’t want to go to this garbage of a hall.”

“Arre yaar! Now you also don’t start off” Saurav said “Let’s go na. We’ll spend less and we can have a good dinner after the movie.”

“And you know that I can’t spend so much. I’ve told you so many times before” Vivek said.

“Listen, I told you I can pay for your tickets” I balked “Now don’t start making excuses!”

“Aryan, why should you pay for me?”

“Because you can’t pay for yourself?”

“Dude. You need to understand that not everybody has as much money to spend as you do. And not everybody is as shallow to be fine with letting others pay.”

That was the most hurtful thing I'd ever heard him say. "Fuck off!" I said, and stormed off. I went straight to my room, bolted the door and slept off.

When I woke up late in the evening, I saw that I had a text from both Vivek and Saurav. Vivek wrote "Sorry for the afternoon, dude. I guess I was just so irritated with the heat. Really sorry. Fyi, we didn't go for the movie"

Saurav wrote "Dinner outside?"

The thing with friends is that it's hard to be miffed with them for too long. I had understood this well in those two-odd years.

"Yes" I replied to Saurav.

Pat came the reply "See you outside the block in ten."

No matter how well you feel you know a person, people are so dynamic that they'll never fail to surprise you. It keeps happening with me too. Early on in our final year, the college was abuzz with political activity. Not that being the College Union President made a difference to the long-term trajectory of one's career; but it was an ego battle – plain and simple.

I, of course, had done barely anything of note to deserve to stand for President. Vivek wanted to. “To bring a change in the way the college works” he claimed.

The evening before campaigning was to officially start, before the candidates were supposed to file their nominations, I was taking an evening stroll around the hostel with Poorva.

“Will you support Vivek?” she asked.

“Obviously!”

“Do you think he’ll win?”

“That’s a tougher question ...” I smiled at her “... to some, he might come across as quite arrogant; and I think those sort of things matter more for these union elections than does content.”

“You’re his best friend. You tell me. Do you feel he’s arrogant?”

“He’s achieved so much in life, that if anybody was in his position, he’d be arrogant.”

“You still didn’t answer the question, though” Poorva persisted.

“I’ll just say he’s a tough friend. He has a point of view, and he’s really rigid about it. But he’s not in-your-face.”

“Fair enough” Poorva nodded “If you ask me, all the goodwill that Saurav has in this college helps both of you. Also, you keeping a low profile keeps the three of you from coming across as an obnoxious bunch.”

“Did someone ever tell you that you come across as bitchy?” I asked, somewhat irritated.

“I’m just honest, yaar.” she started laughing “Anyway, I’ve to go get locked up in my block now. Good night!”

I’ll have one piece of advice for every reader who has a close friend. Never; never let even the slightest seed of doubt take place inside your heart. Because that seed will grow, it will feed off your insecurities and fears, and it will grow; it will grow till it consumes you, colours your judgments and your actions.

To file the nomination for the President of college, five final year students are needed to sign the nomination papers. Saurav and four others signed Vivek’s papers. I was stunned; so stunned that I didn’t know how to bring it up with Vivek. This was when I thought we had no barriers between us.

I was invited to the first brainstorming session for the campaign, of course. I barely took any interest, standing like

a specter in one corner of the room. There were those stalwarts, each of whom claimed complete loyalty from their respective course or club. I felt like a loser – I barely had a fan base whose voting pattern I could sway. The meeting went on and on and on.

A little past two at night, the meeting was over and everyone else left, till it was just Vivek, Saurav and me in the room.

“What post would you want, should we win?” Vivek asked me, finally.

“What?”

“I need to know what post you’d want ...” he said “... so that I don’t promise it to someone else.”

“So you are buying their support, in a way?” I asked.

“Oh c’mon! You know every candidate does that. Since time immemorial”

“And I thought you claimed you’d be different, right? Changing the way college runs, weren’t we?”

“Dude! You need to first get to the top to be able to change things!” he said agitatedly. I don’t know what made him agitated – the fact that I was speaking like this, or that somewhere within, he felt guilty too.

“Right! Perhaps that is the reason you don’t need me? Because I’m of no use to you to reach the top, right?”

“You’re my best friend, dude! Obviously I need all your support”

“And that is why you didn’t even need my name on your nomination papers?”

“You know what ...” he said, laughing slightly “... I knew you’d bring that up. Your ego wouldn’t allow you to swallow that.”

“Good. Now answer me?”

“Because I needed people from different streams to sign the papers. It shows some diversity in the group” he explained “And more people know Saurav in our stream than you.”

He was right. The fact was bitter, but true. Saurav was more popular. So were the other four guys. I was just a nobody, perhaps best known as Saurav and Vivek’s friend.

At that point, Saurav broke his silence “Guys, I can’t believe you’re arguing over this. It’s a stupid college union election that nobody cares about. At least, I don’t. If you do, you’re simple being juvenile.”

“Whatever!” I said “I won’t be part of this. My parents sent me here to study, not to get into all this.”

Then I turned to Vivek, and said “I won’t support the other guy because you’re my friend. But I won’t support you because you’re too arrogant.”

With that, I left the room. Election season came, and campaigning started in all its hues. I avoided even the slightest conversation with anybody who was on either side. I made peace with myself, going and sitting in the library each time it got too much.

On voting day, I went to the voting booth set up inside one of the classrooms. I got a ballot paper that had Vivek’s name, his competitor’s, and a space for neither of the two. I took no time to decide; I ticked Vivek’s name.

While counting was on, I was sitting in my room, studying. I knew the results would be declared at four, and that I would get to know it through the raucous celebratory chants. As the watch neared four, my heartbeat picked up, and my concentration went for a six. Just then, I heard a loud cheer, followed by chants with the other guy’s name.

Vivek had lost. I later came to know that he had lost by a single vote, 445-444. When I came to know, I obviously feared that he’d think that I voted for the other guy. But we

guys got back to being friends with an uneasy truce. “Gives me time to build up my CV” he consoled himself.

Remember what I told you about the seed of suspicion? Well, it is an iterative thing. I suspected that Vivek suspected that I had voted for the other guy. Whatever he now said or did, I looked at it with the lens of the history between the two of us. The burden of history is the heaviest burden in a relationship, probably even greater than that of expectations. It had finally set in.

Anyway, we now get to the final saga. Have you ever had that feeling of preparing for that one last shot at college folklore immortality? Here it was – the college placements. Vivek was the hands-down favourite to land the best job on campus, but had made a pledge to myself to play the spoilsport. It’s not that I loved Vivek less, but I loved success more.

Saurav, Vivek and I spent countless nights preparing for the interview. I also prepared separately with Kalyani and Poorva. At times, I felt it was so pointless. It seemed that, brick by brick, I was building up a façade that I had to present before the interviewers, win their approval and get the job. But I brushed these doubts aside. Sometimes we get so enamored by victory that nothing else matters. I wanted to win, not just over Vivek, but everyone else in college; and I had convinced myself that I was ready to do anything it took.

The day of the interview was ruthless and swift. From a pool of twenty, we were reduced to four in no time. It was Vivek, Poorva, I and a girl from another course. The four of us had made it to the final round, and I was the first to be called in.

“May I come in?” I asked as I opened the door, and saw a panel of three interviewers inside.

“Come in, take a seat” the eldest of them said, grumpily.

“Tell us about yourself” said the female member on the panel.

I had practiced that question more often than I had slept in the past few weeks. I began “I’m Aryan. I am pursuing ...”

“Stop!” said the old man again “We don’t want to hear choreographed stuff here!”

I froze in trepidation.

He started again “We’re busy people here. All four of you have been well-tested in the previous rounds. Tell us, simply, why we should hire you over the other three?”

I feared that question. To try to put down your colleagues, your friends, is something; to do so while not coming across as brash is another. But I had to come up with an answer, and quick.

“Because ...” I began “... this isn’t just another job for me. I really want it, sir.” I looked at them, and felt that I had their attention “I’ve wanted to do exactly this since the day I heard about your company. It’s my dream, my ambition.”

“Sorry to be rude, Aryan, but that sounds like pure bullshit” said the old man.

I was getting agitated by then. “I’m sorry, sir, but that is my only answer.”

“Let’s not be harsh on the boy” the lady spoke again “So, Aryan, it seems that you’ve not been very involved in your college cultural life. Why would that be?”

“Ma’am, guys at college get involved in all of that with the single-minded ambition of building their CV. I really didn’t want to be part of that rat race” I said confidently.

“You’re being contradictory!” the old man said again “If you really wanted this job, and you know that a good CV can get you this job, wouldn’t you do those things?”

“But sir, for me building the skills necessary for this job was what was more important, and these activities in no way helped me do that” I said, almost pleading at this stage.

“What skills have you imbibed? And what do you think our training programmes are meant for?” the man said “Anyway most of the skills you are talking about would probably not be needed at our firm.”

I choked, with fear and disappointment. To not be able to perform well on the big stage, that feels completely different.

“Thank you very much, Aryan” the lady said “Why don’t you wait outside while we interview the other candidates?”

I left the room with a heavy heart. My head was throbbing with what other direction I could have given to the interview. I went back to the waiting room, put my head down and closed my eyes; all this while I was thinking of what could have been. The other guys went in and interviewed.

After two hours, we were all called back into the room with the interviewers.

“I must say that each one of you presented a very compelling case for yourself ...” the old man spoke “... but we can recruit only as many candidates as we have vacancies.”

The lady then took over “With that in mind, the candidates best suited for our firm are Vivek and Poorva. Our firm will benefit immensely from Vivek’s ability to organize a

campaign or an event, and from Poorva's strengths in analytics and her grasp on statistics."

"We thank all four of you for interviewing with us today ..."
the old man said "... and we wish all of you good luck for the future."

To say that I felt hurt that day would be an understatement. I felt defeated. On the way back, we didn't speak to each other. I felt all the more cheated that it all boiled down to being involved in the extracurricular life of college, something that I had despised so greatly. In the end, it all seemed like a popularity contest – be popular, be part of the cultural life, write it on your CV and then end up with the best job.

What was the job for Vivek but just another option? At that point, he wasn't even sure if he'd take up the job or pursue higher education. I didn't ask him, and neither have I talked to him since that day. Soon enough, the final exams began. I toiled day and night, and I topped the class. Not that it mattered anymore.

I landed up another job, of course. With nearly half the pay, though. At times, I look at Vivek's Facebook pictures and feel jealous of the amount of fun he seems to be having. It appears that all this while, he really didn't need me in his life. I feel that I was an ornament in his life, one that is good to have but is not necessary at all.

I talk to Saurav often, and he hasn't been much in touch with Vivek either. Vivek's got new friends now, as I can see on his profile. There's bitterness that engulfs my heart; there's rage that flares up from time to time. My ego prevents me from talking to him; especially as long as I know, and he knows, that he's been more successful than me. I will work hard, to get more success than he's ever seen; and perhaps then I shall confront him. Till then, this is a closed chapter for me. A painful one, though.