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We were always close. In spite of the six years' difference in our ages. Or maybe because of it. Appi was not even a little bit jealous when I was born. And she became a little mom right away. Changing my diapers, rocking my crib for hours on end. And as I grew older, she couldn't bear it when Ammi scolded me. It made her cry, so Ammi would wait for her to leave the room before she started on me. I can remember that.

Even when I joined nursery school, Appi continued to be like a protective, anxious mom. She would check on me sometimes during lunch break. I think my classmates were a little bit envious of my cool older sister. None of

the other older siblings dropped by like Appi. Appi took to Rishi right away too—she would sometimes get us both orange ice lollies that dripped stickily onto our chins and shirts.

Rishi was my best friend from pre-primary. And Uma. One girl bestie. One boy bestie. There was a time when the three of us were really thick. That was when Rishi was having a horrible time at home and it was all a mess, with his dad beating his mom. Rishi's mother was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She laughed easily and freely, she hugged us tight and close. As a child, what was so shocking for me was the fact that anyone would want to hurt such a sweet person.

Rishi would draw broken lines with markers, black and blue and red, on my arms and back, to show what his mother's body looked like after a beating. Uma said it did look sort of cool but she didn't want to be beaten up. We must have been six or seven then.

Once, I remember, Mita Aunty walked into the room when Rishi was drawing on my back. Rishi quickly pulled my t-shirt down but Mita Aunty knew we were hiding something. She looked so very sad. I gave her a hug. I used to be big on hugs, then.

Mita Aunty hugged me back tightly and said, 'Irfan, you know you are my boy too. You will always be with Rishi, won't you?'

I felt worried. 'But you will always be with us, too, no, Aunty?' She nodded and smiled. She had dimples like me, which is why I was her boy too, she said.

Rishi hadn't liked her saying that. When she left the room, he had tried to dig dimples with the pointy end of

a pencil into his cheeks. There were grey smudges on his cheeks after that, but no dimples. My mother doesn't have dimples, I had pointed out. That made him feel better.

Rishi loved Ammi back then, too. When Ammi could be warm and caring. When Rishi's dad got into one of his moods, Rishi came to stay with us. Ammi would make his favourite food for him. Gobhi parathas, which I didn't like. My sister would play board games with us, and we would play cricket in the driveway for as long as we liked, and my parents didn't say anything about bedtime. Then his mom would call to find out how he was doing and thank Ammi for looking after him and she would tell Rishi that all was well at home again, and he could go home the next morning. Things would be better till the next time his dad beat his mom, whenever that might be.

The beating didn't happen that often, sometimes only once in six months, but Rishi's parents fought all the time. There was a lot of screaming and shouting and doors banging in his house. Rishi used to sit in his bedroom with his fingers stuffed into his ears. He hated it. My parents were cold and silent when they were angry with each other or with us. I hated that, too. But Rishi told me I was luckier. My family is fucking stupid, you know that, he would say. We must have been in the fourth standard by then. We picked up the f-word from the older boys on the playground and didn't quite know what it meant. But the way the word was spat out made it sound attractive and we used it a lot.

It wasn't that Rishi got luckier after that, but my life went in directions I didn't want it to. I no longer cared if Rishi's dad was beating his mom, or whatever. When my parents discovered my sister was dating Rohit in Class XII (yes, Ammi walked in on them in Appi's bedroom;

it was pretty melodramatic and awful, and I was about twelve, still a kid and traumatised by all the shouting that went on for days after).

Everything changed at home after that. Appi had already applied for admission to several colleges abroad. Earlier, she had been in two minds about leaving home and studying abroad, but after the Rohit fiasco she waited so eagerly and anxiously to hear from the colleges she had applied to that I felt resentful. She was suddenly so focussed on getting out of the country—on leaving me and everyone behind.

After Appi was gone, it was as if Ammi, Abba and I didn't know how to get along—she was the one who helped with my homework, who intervened when Ammi got angry with me, who listened to Abba when he had a bad day at work. I had never been close to my parents the way Appi was. We were the little dots in that game we played with a sheet of paper and pencils—dots that had to be connected by a line. Ammi, Abba and I were the dots, Appi was the strong, firm line. Without her, the dots were alone, floating around meaninglessly.

I became the fragile one. Rishi and his older brother grew big and strong. One day, Ritesh pushed his dad against the wall and said that the next time he raised his hand on his wife he would personally strangle him. Ritesh became my hero after that. That might have been the last time Rishi's dad beat his mom. At least, that's the last time I can remember. Rishi didn't let his parents affect him, after a point. He worked hard at school, he worked hard at making friends, he worked hard at everything and everyone knows he will be Head Boy of the school in a few months from now.

And then there was Uma. Even when I was closer to Rishi, I loved Uma best. Rishi didn't mind, to begin with.

Uma was a girl, so she didn't count in the same way, not when we were kids and girls were inconsequential.

The fact is, I was hopelessly in love with Uma. I had been, for as long as I can remember. I did feel that Rishi wasn't too happy when Uma and I started dating, but it's alright now. It has been a while; everyone is used to Uma and me. Except me, perhaps. Every once in a while, I look at Uma and wonder how I got so lucky.

That she is beautiful is only a part of it. She is just so very intelligent and good at everything she does. When I told her the other day that I wouldn't be surprised if every boy we knew had a crush on her, she laughed and said, 'That must be a fantasy that all boys have, to satisfy their egos.'

'What?' I said. Sometimes I don't even get what she means.

'You want to think all the boys are in love with your girl—it makes you feel good about yourself. You can be such a male cliché sometimes, Irfan Ahmed,' she said sternly.

I shook my head and frowned. I'm no male cliché. My dad is. My uncles are. Not me.

'It just shows how much I care for you, Uma. Why do you have to bring gender into everything?' I asked.

'Because I must,' she said and smiled and poked my arm with her index finger. I poked her back and she said, 'Ouch, that hurt.'

'You're such a girl,' I said to annoy her.

'I'm so not,' she said and poked me again, really hard this time.

'Uff,' I said.

‘*You’re* such a girl,’ she said, waggling her index finger at me. And pranced away before I could reply.

She always manages to have the last word. But she turned back and smiled. That special smile she has which makes me feel all mushy.

When I reached home, I was still feeling happy and mushy. But it was difficult to hold on to that feeling as I changed and put my books away—the apartment is so empty, big and cold. Ammi and I were always alone in the afternoons. November is a hard month for us—wake me up when December comes, I had said to Uma once, in time for your birthday. She knew November was my sad month and December the happy one because it had her birthday and because it was as far away from November as possible.

I had lunch with Ammi. Two of us at one end of a long table, eating rajma chawal, which I hated. She asked if my day went well and if I had got my maths test results yet.

‘Twenty-two,’ I said. The test was on twenty-five.

‘That’s not good,’ she said.

‘I know,’ I replied, ‘I’ll make up for it next time.’

‘Make sure you do,’ she said, and we continued to eat lunch.

She was so super-strict with us when we were little. She wasn’t anymore.

What was Ammi like now? I couldn’t say. She made sure I studied, went to school, ate and all that. Yet I felt she wasn’t really with us. She stayed in a shadow world from which she occasionally reached out to perform what she thought were her duties. As a mother, as a wife, as a homemaker. But in reality, she was slowly slipping away.

Every day, I felt she was a little less substantial. Like the waning of the moon. One day she will be a sliver, and then just melt into darkness, leaving us alone—just Abba and me in our giant third-floor apartment.

I was sure the exact same conversation would play out over dinner with Abba. He would get more angry than Ammi too. Ok. I am not a genius. Kill me.

I knew my sister aced every paper when she was in Class XI-XII. I was not that bad at studies, but nothing short of the best seemed to please my parents. It was what they were used to with Appi.

I checked my phone. It had been just over an hour since I was with Uma but I was missing her already. Our gang was busy on WhatsApp. Rishi had posted some silly video and everyone was commenting on it. I scrolled down and laughed at what Uma had written. She was the sharpest and funniest amongst us.

Rishi was still my official bestie but we weren't that close anymore. I had only Uma and that was more than enough for me.

Apart from Rishi, my closest friends have always been girls. Maybe because of my sister. I grew up with dolls and kitchen toys. I never really played with cars and guns—I would tag along with my sister and want to do whatever she was doing. In school too, I enjoyed hanging with the girls—I never went through the 'I hate girls' phase like most of my male friends. But I did pretend to. Just to belong with the guys.

By Class VI or VII, it had all started changing. On our school trips, we would play with the girls, in class we would hide their pencil boxes and stupid stuff like that. Then some of us began dating. I was one of the first. It was all

very funny back then. I hardly exchanged two words a day with the first girl I dated, Nishita. We're good friends now and talk to each other so much more than during the three months that we 'dated'!

With Uma, it was different right from the beginning. We were fifteen when I asked her if she would go out with me, and she took forever to decide. She didn't want to ruin our friendship. It happened every time, she said. Date a guy and ruin the friendship. Maybe when we were kids, I argued. We're fifteen and mature now, and if she didn't want to date me I could understand, but 'ruin our friendship' was a stupid excuse. Not an excuse, she insisted, she just wanted some time to think about it. I didn't ask her again.

And then one day, about two months later, I got a text from her:

**YES!!!**

All caps, with many exclamation marks, was very unlike Uma—she was such a grammar nazi. I hadn't messaged her before that. Our last exchange the day before had been about our favourite TV show. I went over all our exchanges in the last few days to see what she could be saying 'Yes' to. I went over all that had happened in school that day in my head—had I asked her a question that needed an answer? And I hoped the 'Yes' meant what I thought it did. That it was the answer to a question asked two months back.

I didn't want to jump to conclusions and make a fool of myself, so I wrote back: **Yes what?**

She immediately replied: **Idiot.**

And then there was silence.

What, I asked after fifteen minutes.

Tell you tomorrow came the reply.

That night I could hardly sleep. I so badly wanted the 'Yes' to mean what I thought it did. But if it didn't I shouldn't be too disappointed. I had to be nonchalant and act as if I wasn't expecting anything.

When she walked up to me in the morning, I couldn't act like I didn't care. My heart was beating fast and I raised my eyebrows and looked right into her eyes, and I knew. It was the yes I wanted. She wrinkled up her nose and smiled and looked so excited that I felt insanely happy right away.

'Yes, Irfan, yes,' she said breathlessly with her arms lifted as if she was going to hug me.

I frowned a little, though I was smiling. I still didn't want to jump to conclusions so I asked, 'Are you sure?'

'Yes, yes,' she said emphatically. It was the best yes in the world, and it made me all woolly with happiness.

That happened almost two years back but I go over that morning in my mind ever so often. I remember I called Rishi to tell him that evening and we chatted for a long time, and Rishi told me that somehow from the time we were in nursery school, some part of him always knew Uma and I would get together some day. That sounded crazy, as if destiny had it all mapped out.

'The sort of closeness Uma and you have always had, it was just a matter of time,' Rishi said. When I had spiralled into depression after my sister left, Rishi had tried to pull me out of it though he was a kid himself, and with problems of his own. 'Some bits of our childhood have been pretty crappy, Irfan, though we don't discuss all that anymore.'

I shrugged. We hadn't discussed our messed-up family lives for ages now. My depression after Appi left, his

parents' relationship ... that day of all days I didn't want to think of all that again.

'We are fine now, Rishi, in spite of it all,' I said, thinking of Uma.

'I agree, man, it's all cool now,' Rishi said.

And it really was. It was all cool. Life was cool, life was good. All of us had already had a fair share of relationships and dating but when Uma and I got together, we all knew it was different and special and we were entering a new phase of our lives.