

nirvana

IN A CORPORATE SUIT

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Chapter 1

“Rape me, my friend”

Nirvana.

For believers, it may have been a divine thought. For the cynics, just a morbid fairy tale that is designed to sweeten the inevitable end.

For me, it was *déjà vu*. Like an idea that has been following me around for the most of my life. A recurring dream, a thought that seems to randomly pop into your head at the strangest of times for no explicable reason. Like in the middle of a meeting. Or an awkward date. Or when your bleary brain is trying to hold on to some degree of consciousness while you try to recover from what feels like positive bludgeoning.

Nirvana.

My brain supplied again. And that thought, I suddenly realized, had nothing to do with my impending renunciation.

“Rape me, my friend”

Faint tunes of the old Kurt Cobain classic floated tentatively in the air.

Was I imagining it? I had to admit it was a rather weird choice of imagination. I didn't remember being a Kurt Cobain fan. But then, at the moment, I didn't remember being much else either.

I decided to try and focus again.

Suddenly, there was a burst of lights. Pink and purple balls began merrily dancing around my eyes. I tried to move my hands to pinch myself. Nothing happened. Apparently, my hands had rebelled against my will and were now lying motionless by my side.

I looked around for clues.

An alarming flash of orange caught my attention somewhere around my nether regions.

A *lungi*, my brain solemnly informed me. Around my waist. I was wearing a *lungi*. An *orange lungi*.

I sat up in alarm, examining the sleeves of my still intact coat-jacket.

I was wearing a coat. And a *lungi*. I was wearing a grey coat with an orange *lungi*. Not that the colour combination was my priority concern. But I was wearing a *lungi* suit.

Why the hell was I wearing a *lungi* suit? Did something like a *lungi* suit even exist?

I looked down again. The *lungi* was gone. Instead...there were pants!

Solemn, black corporate pants. Just like the ones I had worn for the most part of my waking consciousness in past five years. And then they were gone too. The *lungi* was back—in all of its scary orange glory.

Then it was gone. And there were pants. And then it was *lungi* again.

Pants! *Lungi*! Pants! *Lungi*!

Confusion was a running theme with me. But this was way too much. I really wished they stopped and decided already. My head hurt.

Speaking of head, I realized that the pink and purple balls were still waltzing around my eyes—or somewhere below my belt. I wasn't so sure. I blinked hard, willing them to at least stop moving. I needed to concentrate.

Ow!

A multi-coloured explosion in front of my eyes derailed my thoughts. It would have been unsettling if the right side of my

head wouldn't be having an explosion of its own—an explosion of intense pain. I reeled under what I estimated was a concussion. Or nineteen.

Right on cue, there was another dull thud somewhere close to my left ear and the explosion of pain abruptly shifted to the left side of my head.

“Rape me, my friend”

The formerly soft notes (about as soft as Nirvana can possibly be) were now positively blaring in my ears, drumming my concussion hit head with the force of a sledgehammer. I gingerly looked up, finally figuring out the direction of all my troubles.

My eyes met another dark black pair.

Smack!

Something rubbery and sharp hit me squarely in my face.

Ow! I swore under my breath, rubbing what I guessed would be a very visible mark right on my cheek. I did not need to look around to see what hit me. Its companion was already staring down at me, in the hand of its rather annoyed owner.

I braced myself for another smack. From another slipper.

Instead, a choicest abuse rang in my ear—followed by a grating, sneering voice “Will you wake up already? I am running out of stones, and slippers to throw at your lazy ass!”

I winced as a face swam in view—peeping down into a rather deep ditch. My ditch. I was in a ditch.

Why was I in a ditch?

“This is no hibernation time, you sloth bear. Haul your cholesterol sacks up and start moving, stat,” the face that was still peeping down at me noticed my confusion and reprimanded. While I still struggled to respond, the face contorted in what was either extreme fury or extreme pain. It must be fury, my brain

reasoned, judging by the rather threatening motion of the hand that held the slipper.

The sharp sting radiating from the angry red mark on my face had my brain scrambling for consciousness. In less than few seconds, the fog was lifted and the hows and whys of my predicament surfaced in my now lucid brain.

Week 2. On my quest for happiness.

This is a memoir. My memoir.

Which means I am the good guy in here. Any and everything that goes wrong or *is* wrong is never really my fault. If you intend to disagree, you can put the book down right away and scoot!

Whoa! Don't put it down just yet! Can't a guy even joke around here? At least stick around till I introduce myself. For politeness' sake.

I am a nameless corporate guy.

See, there! I got your attention now!

So, I am a nameless corporate guy. Which if you think about it, is not as radical as it sounds. Being a corporate guy pretty much equals being a nameless guy. If you ask me, *nameless corporate guy* should be a recognized biology nomenclature now. Like all *nameless corporate guys* are *Homo Sapiens*, but vice versa is, thankfully, not true.

Anyway, back to my tale. I used to lead a normal life fit for a corporate guy. I reached office at 9. I left office at (fill in the blank with any unearthly hour of the night of your choice). I worked weekdays, partied on weekends—the weekends I was not working that is.

It was not all that bad, really. I could party on the weekends in the most expensive pubs in the city with a bunch of strangers I had no inclination to be with. I could shop till I literally dropped

and splurge on things that I neither needed nor wanted. When I was lucky, I could take time off and go on some crazy, funky trip to Ajerbajian. Or Lithuania. Or any other place that no one I knew could spell.

Hell, with some good planning, I could even take off to Spain to find the meaning of my life a.k.a *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*. You have seen the movie, haven't you?

The point is, I could do a lot of stuff for no good reason except that I could afford it. Which was actually pretty cool! And so, I bought a house and a car even though I knew I was never going to have time to have any real use for them. I still bought them. Because that was the only confirmation I had of belonging to a civilization. Also, because I thought they'd make me happy.

They did. For a while.

You see my dilemma. I couldn't really complain.

I had a job—which in current lean times is nothing short of an achievement. And I had money. Not as much as I wanted, because that right there is the trap of our entire material existence. But I had enough. What I did not have was time...or happiness—but that, as the mature intelligentsia would inform you, is irrelevant when you have a job and money.

It was a tough existence. Not that I have been able to convince many people of the veracity of this fact. You see, being a corporate guy is like walking through thick snow in an Eskimo outfit. The outfit is a luxury alright. But it is still biting cold. And you still have to walk. Yet, no one sees past the damn outfit.

You see my dilemma. I couldn't complain.

I told you. I am the good guy in here.

But I will be honest for a change and admit—maybe it wasn't about the corporate life. Well, not all of it at least. There were people right where I was and they were happy. Not "spend my money on stupid stuff" kind of happy. Really happy. Content.

I wondered if they had something that I didn't. If they *knew* something that I didn't.

After wondering for over half a decade, I decided to find out.

And so, I became a nameless corporate guy who searched for happiness. And found it.

This is my memoir.

It all began innocuously enough. It was just another bad day. In retrospect, it wasn't even the worst day of my life. But it was the tipping point. I think more than anything else, after having spent five years of my increasingly shortening life as a hard-working corporate dude, it was time for my quarter-meltdown. The day was just a measly excuse.

Nevertheless, it was a bad day.

Which doesn't mean that I was pulling an allnighter yet again. Which also doesn't mean that my boss had decided that it was a particularly good day to be mean to me. Which also doesn't mean that I had a massive fight with my girlfriend. This was the stuff a regular, normal day was made of.

That day was worse. *Slightly* worse. I don't remember much except a vague memory of some massively important deal, spending seven continuous nights in the office and yelling at a particularly influential senior. Rest is a dim blur of some more yelling, cross questioning, blame trading and losing credit for any work that I had done on the deal for seven nights in a row.

No big deal.

I could deal with worse. *Had* dealt with worse. It was just as I said—that day was the tipping point.

First time in five years, I walked out of my office at 5 in the evening.

I roamed around the streets for the good part of the evening,

staring at the setting sun I hadn't seen in years and pondered on deep, existential questions of life. Like, why the hell did I yell at my senior? Why didn't I punch him square in the face?

But there were larger concerns too. And right in the centre of it all, was my state of constant unhappiness.

Why was I *this* unhappy?

Obviously, the logical half of my brain was aware that this was bare rhetoric that would be forgotten once my adrenaline high wore off and I'd drag my feet back to the office at 9 the next morning. But at that moment, it seemed to be the supreme concern of my Universe. My logical consciousness was happy to play along.

Which was actually a good thing—because those precious moments of illogical lucidity eventually led me to one of the most important journeys—scratch that—*the* most important journey I would ever undertake in my life.

The journey in the quest of my own happiness!

It had already been three hours since I left the office and I was still roaming the streets as listlessly as was possible for a guy dressed in a crisp corporate suit. The prospect of going back to my empty flat was too daunting. I knew that once I stepped in, the crushing sense of all that had gone wrong that day and my evident helplessness would come crashing down on me. It was wise to put off the blow as long as possible.

It was a good plan, if not entirely healthy or worthwhile. And I would have successfully executed it, roaming the streets of Mumbai until even the most consummate Mumbaikar had given up their fight against sleep.

But Biology was an angry dog with different ideas and was busy wreaking its own slow, sweet havoc until I was walking around with a bladder so full, I was ready to burst.

It was a tricky situation. I could of course relieve myself in any dingy alley as was expected of any sane Indian man. But that sort of behaviour was against my Swachh Bharat instincts, and had never really agreed with me even before our country became woke. At least on paper.

It was my true dilemma. To pee or not to pee. Not that it was an option. So, I did what I had hoped I wouldn't have to, at least for the rest of that sad, hopeless night.

I walked back into my office premises.

I avoided the main entrance because that was the least I could do for myself. There was a back exit that led to a toilet that was rarely used. I stood in front of the dingy, dusty door, and considered my options. I had none. There are few arguments as unassailable as the one presented by a full bladder. So, I steeled myself, avoided taking a deep breath and suppressed a shudder as the cobwebs brushed my hand while I turned the door knob.

The door opened with an ominous creak. A musty stench assaulted my senses as I stepped into the dimly lit, jaundiced interiors of that lavatory. Of course I had to choose this hellhole over the shiny, five star-esque facilities that were scattered across every single floor of this 40 floor building. Because it was just that kind of a day, when a man could not even piss in peace, not without waddling through either filth or embarrassment.

I just wasn't sure if choosing filth over embarrassment was a good idea. Maybe I had underestimated the cost one should be willing to pay for a clean toilet.

Anyway, it was too late for regrets. I held my breath and shuffled towards the nearest urinal, bracing myself to make a run for it as soon as I was done. My business was brief, and not half as satisfying. Which wasn't entirely unexpected given that my lungs were burning due to lack of air and my eyelids were throbbing with the effort of keeping them clenched so tightly shut.

It was somewhere between zipping myself up and discovering that there was absolutely no water supply in this supposed toilet that I heard it. Or rather felt it. It was like the bass line reverberations that you can feel rather than hear, like a silent pulse resonating through your nerves and thumping in your chest. I paused despite my protesting lungs and tried to hear the source of that sound.

The sound which increasingly seemed like faint guitar strains was emanating from a wall at the farthest end of the lavatory. Which wasn't really far. I felt the reverberations again, and for a moment wondered if hallucinations were going to be the latest addition to my stress syndromes list.

The faint sound got slightly clearer as I gingerly moved towards the wall. I strained my ears. Sure as hell, it was there—definitely a guitar. Well, some form of string instrument at least.

What was disconcerting was that the sound was emanating from what seemed like a flat wall. I moved closer. The wall was as grimy as the rest of the place, and while I was tempted, I resisted the urge to stick my ear to the wall and locate the source of the sound. I was curious, not suicidal. Instead, I poked the wall with the tip of my finger.

Well, definitely a wall. Solid as advertised.

The strumming, however, was relentless. I was definitely not hallucinating. Either that or I was too deep in a hallucination and needed to shift to an asylum.

As I looked around, debating the nuances of my own imminent insanity, I accidentally took a deep breath. And swooned. Not in a good way. The sudden onslaught of putrid stench threw me into a dizzy spell.

Head spinning, I was trying to regain my bearings when the guitar sounded again, loud and awfully clear, a ringing sound in my ears. I immediately gave up any pretence of being a germaphobe with the slightest consideration for my health and hygiene, and did the unthinkable.

I stuck my ear to the dirty wall.

The guitar continued playing, louder, now that I was presumably closer to the source.

“Hello!” I tried tentatively, keeping my face close to the wall and voice high enough to be heard on the other side, “Is someone in there?”

The guitar stopped. I held my breath in anticipation.

“Hello, my child!” a deep throaty voice greeted me from within the wall. My breath hitched in my throat. Until this point in time, I had not actively considered the possibility of the other side of the wall being a real possibility. I was perhaps hoping for it to be a fluke, some weird play of the acoustics that was transmitting the sound from elsewhere in the building.

I took a deep breath and cleared my throat.

“Um, Hello...Sir,” I said in wobbly voice, not really sure of the etiquettes one needed to follow with a faceless voice behind a grimy mystery wall, “who are you? And what are you doing in there?”

“Ha!” a throaty laugh sounded from within, “that is not the point here my child. The point is who are you? And what are you doing in here?”

Baffled, I looked around. What I was doing in a mucky toilet was obvious to me until the moment the weird guitar sound interrupted my life.

Now, despite the obvious obviousness of the situation, I was suddenly not so sure.

“I...erm...taking care of business, I guess?” I said, more uncertainly than I would have ever considered being on the subject.

“Do not,” the mystery voice boomed, “cheapen the greatest moment of your life, lad. This may be the divine intervention that you have been always waiting for.”

To be honest, I wasn't waiting for any divine intervention. Five years as a functioning adult, and a corporate slave no less, are bound to suck out all your faith in magic and divine interventions. Cynicism is an essential side-effect of adulthood. Pity, nobody forewarns us about that.

If this were a Chetan Bhagat world, the intervention would come as a divine phone call. Whoever thought that was strange should check with me. At least, a phone call isn't smelly. My divine was apparently dwelling behind an abandoned toilet's wall. I don't even want to know what that possibly says about me.

Anyway, apparently, my divine intervention was operating without any intervention of will or faith (or quality check) from my end. Which was as tragic as it was hilarious. Tragic because even the divine was not interested in my opinion. And hilarious because this was probably a prank, and I was still allowing myself to be played.

Only for a little while, I told myself. Just a little longer.

I cleared my throat and tried to clear my head.

"Um, sir, I don't know what you mean."

The throaty chuckle was in its elements. "Don't worry my child. I know what you are looking for. You are looking for happiness, bliss, contentment. You are looking for life."

I did, actually. Just like the seven billion other inhabitants of this planet. But it was nice of someone to notice.

"Don't you worry, son. Help is at hand. The forces are with you. Your life is about to change. Seek your path and you shall find your way to the ultimate happiness."

I was thoroughly confused. I wanted to believe that this was just a joke, an ugly prank, and yet there was something tugging at my consciousness, something that felt like a visceral weight that wanted me to believe that whatever was happening in here was real.

I was trying to be funny when I said my divine help was behind the wall of a stinky, abandoned toilet. But I was having a dawning realization that there is an actual possibility that it may be true. And I really did not know whether I was supposed to be disturbed or thrilled.

“Erm, Sir,” I decided to switch to direct questions, “what am I supposed to do to, erm, seek my path?”

“Look within yourself. The answers lie within,” the voice philosophized.

Obviously, that was not the answer I was looking for. I tried again.

“Sir, what should I do next?”

“Come and find me. I will lead you to your destiny.”

That was tricky. I imagined running into the wall, and breaking more than a dozen bones. Sure, I wanted happiness. But, *not that much*.

“Find you?” I sought clarification, “in there?”

I could hear the voice rolling its eyes. Seriously, hear.

“Look within, my child. Look within yourself. The answers are all there,” came an almost exasperated reply.

Not helping.

“Could you be more specific?”

The voice cleared its throat and spoke, this time sounding way less throaty and much more normal, “Fly down to Dehradun. Take a bus or a cab to Gangotri. Get down at the bus-stop. There is only one bus-stop there. Stand at the stop and look around. You will see a red coloured, round dome, a couple of meters away. Walk down there. I will be waiting for you.”

I finished jotting down the instruction on my phone. “Thanks a lot,” I mumbled.

“You are welcome,” the voice was throaty again, “now if you will excuse me, I have a song to finish.”

“Sure,” I said, “Just a small question...”

“What?”

“What is in there? I mean where you are at the moment?”

“Oh this,” the voice sounded awfully normal, all dramatic throatiness completely gone, “It’s a closet. There is a door on the other side.”

As I walked away, the faint strains of the guitar followed me, accompanied by a deep humming. It took me a couple of seconds before I recognized the old Nirvana classic and did a double take.

“Rape me, my friend”





Chapter 2

I walked, floated, walked, almost got hit a couple of times and just barely managed to land at my flat in one piece. For once, the silent emptiness of my pad was more than welcome. My head had been bursting ever since I have had my rendezvous with a faceless voice behind a toilet wall.

Nothing made sense. I didn't know what to make of it. Was this some sort of an elaborate hallucination?

I stood in front of the huge full body mirror in my bedroom. The guy in the mirror wore what was a crisp business suit in the morning. Now, it was barely a shadow of its former self. The tie hung loosely around his neck. The 'just begun receding' hairline and an almost there potbelly were right where they were in the morning. The guy staring back at me from the mirror was the same guy I saw every day...and night. And yet, something in his eyes told me that this wasn't really the same guy. Not anymore. There was a gleam in those eyes—a gleam I hadn't seen in years.

I pinched myself hard. Really hard. And yelped in pain.

Nothing changed. The gleam in those eyes was intact and they were staring at me. I stared back.

Then the guy in the mirror winked. I didn't. He did.

I stumbled and fell back. The reflection too stumbled back—just like a normal reflection would. And yet seconds ago, it had winked at me. Without me even considering the idea of a wink. It had. I had seen it. I was so sure of that wink, I could have bet my next promotion on it.

This day was getting weirder by the minute.

Suddenly, the disaster at the office a few hours ago seemed like a very distant memory. Instead, all I could think of was the voice behind the wall—the one that had promised to help me find happiness. And the winking guy in the mirror who looked like me and yet seemed so different.

I realized that whether or not this was a hallucination did not bother me anymore. I figured even if it was, I was not snapping out of it anytime soon. Either way, it didn't matter. Hallucination or not, I was taking the next flight to Dehradun.

I'd be damned if I were wrong, but the guy in the mirror had a smug smile hanging around his lips.

A very heavy mist was descending on the rapidly darkening landscape around me. It was late evening by the time my bus dropped me at *Gangotri*. And now, I stood at the bus-stop, shivering and teeth chattering. My nose was red, leaking and willing to drop off my face any moment. And there was a constant whistling sound in my ears which was either the wind or the symptom of an early onset of deafness.

I should have gotten more clothes. Warmer clothes. And a muffler.

A couple of mufflers.

It was May. Goddamn May! Down where I came from, people were practically roasting into walking kebabs. And here I was—freezing in sub-zero temperatures.

This is what happens when we embark on random, impulsive adventure trips at the urging of faceless voices. I should have researched. Or applied some common sense. These were the Himalayas after all.

I looked around at the rapidly approaching nightfall. It was already dark and the heavy mist was making it impossible to see

anything beyond an arm's length. No chance I was going to find a red dome that was supposed to be a few meters away.

My teeth chattered again. A strange sense of panic had begun to throttle my brain. So far, it had all been an adrenaline induced rush. Shoot a mail to the office feigning illness, get the tickets booked and scramble to the unknown destination. No time or need for any thoughts.

But now, as I stood at the bus-stop, alone and shivering—my brain was going in an overdrive. What if this whole thing was a prank? Or worse still, a hallucination? What had I been thinking? I couldn't believe I actually ran away from my job—the job that had meant everything to me. And for what? Ramblings of an invisible voice!

I shuddered again. And this time, it wasn't the cold. I needed to put a stop to my chain of thoughts before I went insane. If I had not already, that is.

I considered finding a shelter for the night and look for the red dome in the morning. But there was a panic rising in my chest that told me I *needed* to find the dome ASAP. Years of meeting deadlines meant I recognized the signs immediately. I needed to act. Now. The 'or what' of the situation was not clear yet. But I had a sinking feeling that it wasn't unicorn and rainbows.

I began by asking around. Thankfully, it was the peak tourist season, and there were plenty of people to ask. 20 in total, actually. Turned out that red dome wasn't exactly a unique feature in the town. But most of them were convinced that I was looking for a relatively abandoned Ashram right next to the banks of Ganga.

I started making my way towards the so called Ashram. According to the locals, it was a five minutes' walk. But for my frozen limbs, felt like an hour long haul. I was getting light-headed by the minute. I wasn't sure if dying of hypothermia bang in the middle of May was normal even in Gangotri but I was surely going to set a precedent.

I dragged my feet with humongous effort, hoping and praying that I will at least make it to the Ashram before my limbs gave out.

I didn't.

Instead, I found myself sprawled in front of a bare bodied man in saffron underwear—a lungi to be precise...standing on one foot. I am sure in these parts of the country, standing naked in sub-zero temperatures, striking yoga poses was perfectly normal. For lesser mortals like me, it was deeply disturbing. I am pretty sure that the sight hastened my looming brain freeze.

“Need...to ...find...the ...red...dome,” I wheezed, hardly expecting a response. Surprisingly, the eyes flew open immediately and looked down. The guy...sadhu...whatever surveyed me calmly, never really losing the pose.

Then he spoke. And the world stopped spinning around me.

“Took you long enough. I have been waiting for you,” he spoke in a throaty voice. *The* throaty voice. The voice from behind the wall.

I collapsed.

I woke up, feeling considerably warmer and better. A faint sunlight was streaming through the window and I had been wrapped in a blanket that suspiciously resembled a furry hide. But it was warm and I didn't care.

“Ah! You are finally up. I thought you have slipped into a coma,” the yoga guy was in the room, What a mess that would have been!” he commented with an alarming nonchalance. I sat up quickly. He stared at me with a mildly amused expression.

“Where am I? And who are you?” It wasn't polite. But I needed all the facts. And I needed them quick.

“Relax man. You are right where you should be. In Gangotri, at an Ashram. My Ashram.”

A loud hurtling sound in the background confirmed the presence of a river in the vicinity. Ganga. This was definitely Gangotri.

“And you?” I didn’t wait for his answer, “are you the voice from the closet?”

He let out a huge guffaw, “That’s quite a way of putting it,” he said, “Of course I am. Why else would I bring you in here? Do you think I harbour hobbies that involve picking up random, passed out guys and bringing them home?”

If he did, I wouldn’t know. But I kept my mouth shut. And allowed myself to fall back in relief. Partly because I had found ‘the voice’. And partly because it belonged to a real human being. I had half expected to discover an invisible man, an apparition, a floating voice or worse still, nothing at all. And I can’t say it was a particularly enticing prospect.

The yoga guy was still staring at me with the same amused expression. I realized I should introduce myself.

“Erm...Hi...I am—” I extended my hand uncertainly. He brushed it aside.

“Don’t bother. I am the one who invited you here, remember. I know you. Everything about you. Besides, I don’t care for names. They are added ego burdens.”

I dropped my hand and shifted gaze. I tried to wrap my head around the idea of a complete stranger knowing everything about me. It suddenly made me feel extremely vulnerable. Naked.

Maybe he was the NSA.

“I am not NSA, and this is not America, thank God. I just have a great back-end support.”

I involuntarily slunk back. He could hear my thoughts?

“Maybe,” he said, closely examining his finger nails. I jumped out of my covers at the sound of his voice.

“What?” I looked at him, suspiciously.

He looked up and met my eyes, smiling. “I said, maybe I should go and make arrangements to get us started.”

“Oh,” I said as I fell back on my bed, not entirely convinced. I knew I should have sought answers. I deserved to know how he knew me and why? Why was he here? Why was I here? What was all this about?

But I was too intimidated by the air of enigma around him. I couldn’t gather enough courage and decided to let it go. For now.

“Who are you?” I finally blurted out the only question I could manage.

“Me,” he gestured theatrically, “I am your saviour. Your philosopher. Your guide,” he said “that is all you need to know.”

Honestly, it didn’t take too much effort on my part to shut down the logical half of my brain that was constantly warning me about how creepy and weird this whole thing was and how wary I should be. Something about this whole adventure felt very right. I had come this far and for this once, I was willing to go with my gut.

A sudden shuffling around me broke my reverie. The naked dude—my guide was suddenly in a tearing hurry.

“We need to get started. You go freshen up...have a bath if you can.” I looked at him puzzled as he caught my eye. He answered my unvoiced question, “I don’t have a water-heater.” I nodded in comprehension, estimating how cold the water in the bath would be.

“Now hurry. And leave the sorry excuse of your clothes behind. You will find real clothes in that closet—the ones that will make sure you don’t die,” he pointed at the lone closet in the room and started hurrying out.

“Sir,” I called behind him tentatively. He stopped in his tracks and turned around.

“Baba,” he said, “call me Baba. Sir makes me feel like I am trapped in a glass cubicle.” I nodded and began to speak before he interrupted with another precious thought, “I need to have a name for you.”

I knew better than to offer him my real name.

He eyed me critically as I shuffled self-consciously under his gaze.

“Bingo!” he said suddenly, his eyes fixed on my very visibly receding hairline and five hair strands that stuck to my forehead, putting up a valiant fight, “with hair like that, there is only one name that suits you.”

I looked at him warily.

“Zulfi!” he clapped with glee and announced.

I sighed and fell back. This was going to be a long quest.

“Baba.”

“Zulfi.”

I sighed. It was going to take some time before I got used to that name. And of course, there was no talking Baba out of it. I bit back my thoughts and continued with the conversation.

“Where are we going?”

“To the transformation of your life.”

I tried again. “That I get. But, *where* are we going?”

Baba stopped and rewarded me with a glare, “You can’t live without direct answers. Can you? I hate your lot—the corporate straight guns. Always a pain. Wanting flowcharts and excel sheets for everything.”

‘My lot,’ I wondered. This meant that there had been others before me. I was intrigued but there was no point asking. If there was one thing that I had figured about Baba in the past few hours,

it was how much he hated giving straight answers. That and his constant state of sarcasm. I am sure he thought he was very funny, a bundle of delightful wit. At some point of time, I was going to inform him of his misconceptions.

A guy could dream.

“We are going to an ancient cave. It is the place where you will find your answers and if you are deserving,” he looked at me pointedly, “then maybe the ultimate secrets to happiness and life.”

He had finally answered my question and instead of alleviating my worry, had instead multiplied it. What did he mean by ‘if I was deserving’?

I wasn’t expecting an obstacle course to happiness. I didn’t know what to expect. I wasn’t even prepared.

‘How bad could it be?’ I mentally counselled myself, steeling up for whatever lay ahead.

Baba was walking in front of me, stopping occasionally to let me catch up. So far, it had been a fairly straight and easy terrain. My limbs were still having a tough time putting up with all the exertion after lying around uselessly under the table for years.

Baba was, thankfully, not naked any more. Or I would be having a hypothermia attack just by looking at him. He was now in an elaborate saffron ensemble. Actually saying saffron was being polite. He was wearing a very bright orange sweater over a slightly less orange lungi that stuck way above his thighs. It was a small mercy that there were no orange stockings to complete the look. Instead, there were long naked legs ending in strange looking boots. How did his legs manage to remain unfrozen was a mystery to me. But this was still better than him trekking in only his underwear.

Baba was nimble and agile. He wasn’t exactly the age of a Baba... any baba. He actually looked rather young—not beyond thirty by any estimate. But then, he was a Baba, an ascetic—maybe yoga

was the secret to his youth or something. The only thing was, the mandatory saffron attire apart, there was nothing remotely Baba like about him. He was lean but sturdy. His hair were long but not matted like normally associated with his kind. Instead, they were shiny and smooth. The kind that reminded me of wannabe rockstars and made me want to ask him about his shampoo. He was enigmatic no doubt and radiated a sense of peace. But he was also sharp, irreverent and sarcastic—again not something very Baba like.

But he was, as he had so eloquently worded it, my saviour. And given the predicament I had placed myself in, I hardly had an option but to trust him.

The terrain got tougher by the hour. But I was coping better and better. May be it was all the loosening of the limbs. May be it was all the clean air filtering the soot from my choked lungs. May be it was Baba threatening to throw me off the next cliff if I didn't hurry. But I had managed to finish a six-hour trek to wherever Baba thought my salvation lay and was still going strong. I couldn't help being simultaneously surprised and proud of myself.

My journey to happiness...or transformation as Baba put it, was taking me to, what I think, was one of the remotest corners of this planet. The corner that lay beyond the point of River Ganga's origin.

I hadn't figured this on account of my excellent knowledge of Geography. Baba had informed me during the few conversations we had managed that went beyond grumblings and threats. Apparently, trekkers usually stopped at the point of Ganga's origin. But we were headed to a point that lay beyond—a set of pre-historic caves that have largely evaded the intrusion of the human civilization in any form. Within these caves lay the ultimate secrets to happiness; to bliss; to life. Or so Baba said.

It was remarkably cold. And that is a chilly understatement. The sun was shining but its rays were barely reaching us. There was snow all around us. The ground beneath was thankfully still solid and unfrozen but I could see traces of molten snow. Baba had told me that if there was one wise thing I had done, it was arriving there in May. The ground was snow free and the sky was clear—the absence of either or both did not only mean hell—in extreme cases, it meant death.

“People die looking for happiness more often than anybody would care to admit. Why should this be any different?” Baba had shrugged.

I swallowed his words. At least I wasn’t going to die. Not unless the weather gods decided to act as hired assassins and sent rogue, unexpected rain or storms our way.

It was a consolation. Not that I needed any. I didn’t need Baba to elucidate the dangers of trekking through one of the most difficult terrains in the Himalayas, especially minus any significant previous experience. But I was beyond care. Had been, for a while. I finally felt a sense of purpose I hadn’t even once in the last five years. There were deadlines, there were objectives, there were promotions and perks to vie for—but there was no real sense of purpose. But now, my personal happiness, the transformation that Baba kept promising—it felt like a worthwhile purpose. Maybe it was all the adrenaline talking, but I felt really motivated.

I knew I had taken a huge risk. I had taken the plunge. I had put everything that mattered to me on the line and dived in, heart and soul, into this quest. Somehow, instead of making me scared, it made me happy. Fuelled. My head was remarkably clear and if the surging sensation in my heart was anything to go by, my search for happiness was definitely on the right track.

I was going to do it.

