My Way Is the Highway

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For every dreamer and believer.
The door slammed shut.

‘Seriously! Watch me!’ she hissed under her breath as she stepped out drawing a perverse sense of satisfaction from the sound.

That felt good . . . shit! I should have known. Yeah! Look at me all of you, why don’t you? Scandal seekers, gossip mongers.

She picked her bag, grabbed Coco, returned the shoot tapes and walked out. Out of the newsroom, out of the building, with the single-minded aim of looking self assured.

Not a weak moment. Not now.

She could feel her skin quiver.

Uff! Why do you ring when I just don’t want you to?

‘Yup!’

‘What did I just hear? You walked, no stormed out of PVT’s room. Is that correct?’ Sheebani asked in a nervous tone.

‘Kind of. But don’t want to talk about it right now. I’ll call you later. Pakka babu.’

She disconnected before Sheebani could say another word.

Ha ha! The mill does work fast. Sheebani the tube light knows and that means everyone knows. Great! One week’s gossip fodder. Let’s see how long it takes before the pack from other places starts calling. Apparently not too long.

‘Hey baby! Wassup?’ she said mustering up all the cheer
she could, squinting in the sunlight, rummaging in her bag for her shades and her car keys, hitching up her salwar and walking in a queer flat-footed way to keep her feet from getting dirty.

Why don’t they pave the entire parking lot? No mitti. No problem.

‘Woman! I just got a call from Suresh and Sheebani and Sidra. Very amusing, but not very good. What happened? Are you ok? Do you need me to come over? Or you know what, meet me at Mocha in twenty and we’ll talk.’ Kunal’s concern was almost touching.

‘Damn! Now where the eff is the key! Sorry that clearly wasn’t for you. I am on my way out of office as you have probably guessed already. I think coffee will have to take a rain check baba. Am going home . . . no re! Home as in idhar wala home. Not Gaya. How can I just head to Gaya? Stop being silly and making too much out of it. I am ok. Ok? I’ll give you details later. Still processing.’

‘Fine. Call me when you want to. And, please don’t do anything stupid. No repeat performances of Bikaner,’ Kunal said anxiously.

‘Dude! I’ll stop talking to you if you do that below-the-belt-thing. Go now. Ok, bye.’ She hung up thinking why on earth did she ever tell him about the Bikaner fiasco.

Please stop ringing. Don’t people get it? I don’t want to talk right now. Aaarrgghh! Shit! That did not mean fall and crack your face, you moronic ringing maniac.

She beeped her car open, got behind the wheel, gave Coco his seat on the dash and answered. ‘Yes Poshy!’ She said in her best baby voice.

‘Oye! I am in Delhi in two weeks. What are you up to then? Can you take a couple days off?’
'Sure babe. Let me know when you reach. Maybe I can even pick you up.'

‘You sound a bit agitated. All good?’

‘It’s so bloody hot! The seat’s burning my bum and back, and its only April. Can’t believe I still drive this thing. No freakin’ AC!’

‘Oh ho! Waise it’s almost May. Like one day short. It has to be hot na. Just go get some cold coffee. And you know you love Dugg-dugg. It’s not her fault anyway. I miss her and our India gate haunts. By the way, how is Dada?’

‘She’s great, as always. Spoke to her last night. We were in fact talking about doing the coffee ice cream from Pandara and then sunrise at India gate awaragardi for old times’ sake. Come soon. We just have to do that again.’

‘I’m doing that. Super soon. Accha listen you mad child, how is work? Saw your illegal mining story last night. Good show kiddo.’

‘Thanks babu. Work’s good and very hectic. I’ll tell you all when we catch up. Gotta go now. Speak to you soon. Muuah!’

You know I don’t hate you. Don’t you? I’m just a bit annoyed. Sorry I banged your door. Didn’t mean to. Irritation residue acting up. Let’s go see Iqbal. I need a fucking break! Like now. This shit has got to end. I mean it this time. Babes, we need to figure what to do.

Ok! Before you all get thoroughly confused, I’ll give you a little insight. My name’s Manki. Mansha actually. Mansha Sharan. But I hate that name. I am forced to use it on-air and that’s the only time it’s ever heard. I prefer Manki and so that’s how I go. My ancient non-airconditioned Maruti 800, a hand-me-down from dad, is my little darling and she’s called
Urvashi

Dugg-dugg. Don’t ask me why. I saw her and the name just came to me. Don’t go by the name though. She’s like a mini race car and I, more often than not, cross 100 kmph in this little baby. In Delhi. Traffic or no traffic. That’s the beauty of a tiny car. Iqbal’s my jeep. His full name is Iqbal Mastani—a 1942 Ford, left hand drive, and the love of my life. My uncle gave him to me. I begged him to from the time I was ten years old. That was the year I named him too. I guess that sealed the deal and ten years later he came to me on my twentieth, during my final year at Delhi University.

I give everyone and everything a name. My cell phone is Ting-ting and my stuffed lion is Coco. He shamelessly sits on my desk announcing to the world that I am a Leo, and my laptop’s Laddu. That’s enough general knowledge for now on my nomenclature patterns.

I am like a cockroach when it comes to music. I listen to everything, but ABBA are my mostest favouritest. My happiest pick-me-up. I don’t get art and I love movies. I enjoy slamming doors when I am angry and I use cuss words for punctuation. I am unabashedly flighty and mildly vain. I tried learning riding, classical dancing, classical singing, kick-boxing, pottery, salsa, t’ai chi and photography. The last is the only thing that stuck, mostly because I now own a point-and-shoot, fuss-free Canon digicam. My SLR is missing somewhere in action, probably at the back on the top shelf of my overflowing cupboard.

That reminds me I need to look for it.

I am happiest in shorts and vests or tiny skirts and self-ripped oversized T-shirts much to the horror of some of my prim ‘you-should-dress-properly’, ‘Delhi-is-not-as-safe-as-you-make-it-to-be’ chanting friends and the resigned acceptance of my parents. I love them anyway. They are merely concerned.
I, more often than not, wear jeans and salwar kameez. You see, I don’t discriminate against them just because they’re not my favourites and I am fully aware of workplace ethics—you have to if you are an on-camera face.

I have like a zillion friends. No seriously. I’ve been to twelve different schools, including a boarding school for four years. Dad, being in the army, did this to almost all of us fauji brats. But thankfully just one college and one hostel. This is my third job since I started working and none of my school friends share my profession. Also, my job makes me meet another million, like everyday. Some of who are nice and friend-worthy. So you do the math on the sheer number of friends I have and the sheer range of professions we are talking about here. And before you attempt to do the number crunching, I’d like to tell you that I am extremely social, make friends easily, barring the numerous cases of unhygienic tips and toes, and keep them. I’m a bully with the boys and the boy among the girls.

I have my pretty days and my fat days like most girls. I have my happy days and grumpy days like most human beings. I am as judgemental as most of us, just that I say out loud what’s in my head. I am just a wee bit dysfunctional, but I get past it. I detest dirty feet with a vehemence not known to anyone else and have, on more than one occasion, gifted people foot powder, deodorant and soap for being the vile carriers of smells that make me want to die.

I’m very house proud and I love to throw parties. I usually cook my own food—the only exception is rotis. That’s simply because I don’t do atta. I never have and I don’t think I ever will. I clean my own flat but never the dishes. I hate what that does to my hands and nails. So I have a maid who also doubles as my cook. I invariably give dad a cash-distress call by the twenty-fifth of each month to get some funds to
tank up Dugg-dugg and Iqbal and fund the last few coffees of the month.

I love nail polish and gloss and kohl. I hate any other makeup. I pinch my cheeks if I feel the need for blush. Mascara is an acquired taste, thanks to the professional demands, and I am yet to try the sample-sized bronzer my brother’s fiancé sent me. I am a shoe and book whore. I love clothes, bags, earrings and watches. I don’t wear anything too posh or expensive unless of course it is shoes. I sometimes dream about shoes. I can change a bust tyre, wearing stilettos and without getting my clothes dirty. Trust me, it’s a great skill to have.

I love my job. Really, really love it. But seriously dislike most of the paan-chewing, barefoot, bhaiya order-givers who think they know it all and that you are nothing but a face that looks half decent on camera and have no grey cells at all inside that dome resting on your shoulders. And for Christ’s sake, which sensible producer would ask you to wear a shiny orange kurta in Delhi’s peak heat and keep your hair poker straight at all times? My awesome dress sense takes offence.

Oh! That Bikaner incident you must be wondering about . . . right? Well let’s just say, ages ago, in college, I had a fight with my boyfriend and silly, impulsive me packed my bags and went to see mum and dad in Bikaner. Dad was posted there before moving to Jammu and then Pune and now Gaya. In my single-minded attempt to not bother anyone, I simply forgot to tell anyone—my room-mates in the hostel or my friends from college or my boss at the place I was interning. So basically, friends assumed I am in hostel and the hostel people thought I am crashing at my college buddy and co-intern Maati’s till my boss called her the next evening and all hell broke loose. Within minutes
phones started to ring frantically. My good luck fairy gave me the better sense just at the same moment to call Maati and tell her where I was and to tell boss I won’t be in for a couple of days. Bad idea. BAD IDEA.

‘You freakin’ idiot! We were already discussing calling the cops. I’m at your hostel. We were just trying to locate your dad’s number through the army phone here and arguing just who should go tell your matron about your disappearance. You are mince when I see you!’ Maati lashed out furiously.

It took an hour to pacify her and the whole bunch she had gathered around her by then. With many explanations and apologies, I hung up, having made three mental notes: One—buy her a recharge card when I got back to Delhi. The era of chargeable incoming calls on cell phones sucked. Two—never do what I had just done and the way I did it. Three—make each of the now aware-of-my-grand-vanishing-act swear not to mention this again.

Coming back with the news of a new boyfriend who was taller than most Indian men, well spoken and a fighter pilot, didn’t gain me any extra points. The incident was a total disaster and now tops our collective never-to-do things list. It’s still my very-sore sore spot—thanks to the very well-timed reminders from the idiots I call friends.

You have probably figured out by now that I have conversations between the left and right hemispheres of my brain as a matter of routine. And I talk too much. And now am shutting up.

PS—I only eat omelettes for breakfast or nothing at all. The only exception I ever made was in boarding school where we got parathas on Sundays and boiled eggs on Wednesdays. As you can see, going hungry wasn’t an option. It still isn’t. It makes cranky seem dangerous.
Jeans, skinny jeans, T-shirts, shorts, vests, denim skirt, kurtas, salwars, dupattas, undies, socks, floaters, shoes, sandals, black heels, shampoo, conditioner; body wash, face wash, moisturizer; sunscreen, toothbrush, toothpaste, floss, talc, gloss, kajal, mascara, deo, perfume, nail polish remover; peach and red nail paint, top coat, curl serum, Band-Aid, Disprin, Crocin, crêpe bandage, Moov. Great! Water, wallet, Swiss army knife, camera, iPod, laptop, chargers, biscuits, chewing gum, notepad, pen, hair clips, hair bands . . . and map.

She stopped rummaging about.

And oh—the black dress, black heels and the push up bra. Just in case.

‘I guess we’re sorted and good to go.’ She picked her bags and headed out, dialling her dad’s number.

‘Papa! Wassup?’ she said the instant he answered the phone.

‘It’s mum.’

‘Hi Ma! Wassup? Had lunch?’

‘Haan. Dad’s napping. You want me to wake him up?’

‘No no. Just called to tell you that I’m going out of town for a shoot. Be back in a week or two. It will depend on how the story shapes up. I’ll keep you posted as often as I can. I’m locking up as we speak.’

‘But you just got back from the blast? And you were gone last month too?’

‘Mom! The blast was over two months ago. I went last month to do a follow-up. This is another story. And, it’s not as
if you’ll miss having me around given how far away you guys are anyway. I’ll call everyday like I do. You know that.’

‘Ok fine. Where are you going? Hope you took everything you need. Did you pack your towel? And your face wipes?’

‘Shit! Now you know why I love you. I forgot my towel, my face wipes and rose water. How do you always know? I’ll call you back. Let me get this sorted. I am going to UP by the way. Straight into the heartland!’

She went back in, got her stuff, stuffed in a plastic bag, locked up again and called back.

‘Mum?’

‘Haan. Got it?’


‘Take care. Bye’

Ok. Time to switch parking slots and load up. Let’s go.

He made her smile no matter what. Despite the singe of hot metal on her palm she touched him like she was drawing some of his strength.

I know you probably don’t approve, but you have to play along anyway my dear. I just hope it all falls in place.

She climbed into her partner in crime, stroked his steering, gunned the engine and reversed him out of the not-so-shady spot under a frail tree. She left him running, loaded her bags and kept her handbag on the co-drivers side along with the water bottle. Then she quickly got into Dugg-dugg and parked her where Iqbal was till a few minutes ago.

That should take care of it.

Putting Dugg-dugg’s keys along with the house keys in the small zip pocket inside her bag, just so they don’t get misplaced, she put Iqbal in first gear, drove super slow to the dhobi’s spot, told her washerwoman to not come for the next
few days and to pass on the message to the maid too. The washerwoman assumed that she was going out for a story, wished her luck and asked her to take care. Her daughter, fond of Manki for all the candy she got from her, waved her goodbye with a big toothy grin.

Pays to have a job that makes you travel tons. I love this. No one will ever know. Good I have maids who always believe me and never tattle to the neighbours. Takes care of some of the hassle for sure.

She lit a cigarette as she got out of her colony’s gate.

Do I need coffee? I need coffee. I want coffee. I am going to get coffee. I am getting coffee.

‘One ice blended coffee. Strong. No sugar please. Very very quickly.’

‘Takeaway madam?’

‘Yes please.’

Out of the neighbourhood coffee shop, she drove back towards office.

Don’t do it. You’ll end up going back in. Don’t do it. You don’t have to do this to yourself. Damn it! Do it and let’s see what happens. What are you afraid of? The building won’t swallow you . . .

She stopped outside the concrete and glass block that had been her life for the past three years, behind which she had been till an hour ago. The parking attendant asked her if she needed to park, snapping her out of her painful pang moment.

‘Aap kahin jaa rahe ho?’ he asked, looking at all her stuff in the car.

She smiled back at him, put Iqbal in gear and said, ‘Haan’. She gave him a tenner to take care of his daily parking slot, the same parking where she had discovered the joy of drinking rum and coke in disposable glasses on night shifts, rolled her first while–at–work joint and had figured that bitching over endless cups of tea and cigarettes is rather therapeutic.