



swap()

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It has been raining for five days now. It would have been a cliché to start the narrative with rain but the layers of sparkling paint oozing through the unearthly atmosphere is a bit of a hiccup to get used to. It's like the bright wallpapers that your brand new phone would usually come with — only to find itself with shards on one corner a few months later.

I had no idea of how much time I had spent while peeping through the infinitely approaching arcade of the colourful debris. It's beautiful, but a scary sort of beautiful. The sort of beauty that won't remind you of food platters meant to be enjoyed with rain dripping in the background. The sort of beauty that won't allow you to romanticise the familiarity of petrichor.

It felt as if a termination letter was handed out to my appreciation for the absolutely chaotic state of nature when the doorbell rang. The cocky doorbell playing poorly done 8-bit renditions of 80s Hindi classics could only make me question my dad's tirades on modern day music. I let my gasp fume through the air-conditioned room invisibly and get off of the bed to check the peephole. Should have guessed it — it was none other than the aunty who lived a floor below. In fact, her voracious aura is enough to let people within a three-metre-radius know that she's there, possibly mocking our doorbell while she's at it.

No sooner had I let her in than her comments on my appearance poured in. Weirdly enough, this time each of her comments seemed to contradict whatever she said three days ago. Though I strongly doubt whether I've gained any weight or added a few inches to my height in the last three days or not, I can affirm that I certainly haven't mustered the courage to ask out the girl I like.

My mother makes her timely appearance flaunting her selectively sociable charm, right after the hell of a neighbour had sent my self-esteem further down the dumps. I sigh once again — this time in relief.

It's almost as if the deities above had decided not to let me enjoy my moment of peace for that day. Ever since my neighbour aunty had made her way into the living room, the audacity of her presence had propelled the surroundings with power unfathomable to the average human. Her voice could be heard from miles away, presumably competing against the humming that sea creatures do when they lose an offspring or two. It also had another repercussion that I had to bear with — non-consensual eavesdropping.

"Janen bhaaabi," she exclaimed in shrieking tone — making room for the mythological mas terpieces that are about to take place.

"The new cable is so hard to get hold of. A guy from the cable came a few days ago and installed this newfangled powered box thingy in our living space. I can hardly make my way through the list of a-million-something channels. It got so annoying that I had to ask for Rafeed's help that day to find Deimos Plus," she says while struggling multiple times to pronounce 'Nuclear'.

"I'm afraid the channel got upgraded to Cosmos Plus," my mother gloats in the glory of her high ground in TV channel trivia, shrewdly avoiding my contribution to her pool of knowledge.

Her calm composure did a little bit of damage to my neighbour's self-esteem, possibly a fraction of the verbal havoc she had brought upon me a few minutes ago. She tried to shake it off by faking a cough — reverberating through the awkward silence. She then moved onto the next topic of the British tabloid that they both had

been weaving in their minds.

"I've heard that Shyama from the sixth floor is going out with an alien."

"Topper Shyama?"

"Yes."

"You mean that Shyama who did so well in her 9th grade term final that coaching centres are already trying to snipe her for their entrance exam batches?"

"Yes, that Shyama. I think that's also the reason why she's been getting good grades recently. I think she's going out with one of the alien teacher's sons."

My neighbour finished the last statement with a sneer. She could see herself as the clear winner by dropping the bigger headline of the tabloid, something of much more weight when stacked against my mother's trivial TV channel trivia.

"I see" — both the heads nodded compulsively in unison as they knew for sure that no single human involved in heretic affairs such as 'Dating' would ever be able to excel in any other field in their lives, leaving their worries of mismatching chromosomes for another day.

Silence was followed by.

"By the way, bhaabi. Your skin seems to be glowing more than usual—"

A huge scream exploded through the empty space of the house, shaking up every inch. I approached the foreground as quickly as possible, only to find her scaly skin glistening through the acrylics of thunder coming from the opening of the living space. Her gaze had fixated upon me by then — she was looking at me with all the resentment she could accumulate from my mother's bitter words. It was as steady as my mother's resting body on the couch, but it was as sharp as the bodily extrusion that went through her heart.