

## Once a Friend, Always a Friend

– Akshat Shukla\*

*“Between friends, differences in taste or opinion are irritating in direct proportion to their triviality”— W. H. Auden*

That day, at the sunset, I had this desire to stroll unto the horizon, and plunge into the crimson light of the dying sun when my mobile phone vibrated and brought me back to reality. It was a weird message on my *WhatsApp* that made me almost wonder, for a moment, at the darkness that was creeping in as the sun was setting down. It was a staple good-morning-picture from a number that was not saved in my phonebook, but that seemed as familiar as it could be. I started walking back home, flooded with memories that were till then lying in the dustbin of my consciousness.

Back at home, lying on my bed at 11 PM, I thought of texting back to the same number, though it seemed almost unworkable to concoct a text message that would make that person stop forwarding such good-morning-pictures in the evening. I finally typed ‘What’s this?’ and touched the ENTER key. As far as I remember, I waited for at least three hours for a reply until sleep took over me.

The next morning, when it became almost impossible for me to bear the sunlight anymore, I woke up, and the first thing I did was to unlock my phone. Finally, I found a reply to my message: ‘Oh sorry! I was high on booze.’ I felt annoyed at the crude idiocy of the message and shot back with a curt and terse ‘What do you want now?’

Fifteen days prior to this stupid incident, I had a terrible fight with my best friend, Shreyash, over an issue that was hard to pin down from both the sides. Shreyash and I had been friends for more than ten years; we had similar interests— whether it was some silly gossip over a cup

of coffee or some intellectual stuff about literature and philosophy. The thing I really liked about him was his wholehearted and comical carelessness towards life and his unbridled zeal to enjoy whatever came his way. What he really liked about me— well, I never cared to find it.

Shreyash was always amazing at whatever he did, but his absolute carelessness was too much to handle in certain situations. And when he was selected in an interview for a very lucrative job in a multinational company, he was happy like hell. I was the first person whom he informed about this fortunate development. And as was always the case, the party was on him. But this time— though nobody spoiled the party, the party spoiled the equation and chemistry we shared all these years.

Shreyash was harbouring wild and insane ideas about the upcoming party and kept it under wraps to maintain the suspense. Finally, the day came and we— Shreyash, me, and three other common friends (Rajeeve, Vijay, and Prabhas)— were all at this minimalist restaurant where we felt a kind of liberation: We were free to discuss and do whatever we wanted. ‘Story of My Life’ by One Direction was playing in the background. We went with the flow and ordered all sorts of tasty stuff. But towards the end of the party, something awful happened.

‘Folks, now is the time for some booze. It’s the time to get high on the drink of life, love, and liquor. What is special is Divakar too will be sharing drinks with us today. Tequila, vodka, whisky, and whatnot,’ Shreyash shouted at the top of his voice.

‘Wait what!?! You must be crazy. I don’t consume alcohol. And you know that,’ I shouted back.

‘Come on, dude! I know that. But it’s my first job party. You gotta do what I say. Everything has its first time,’ he replied.

‘I know what it means to have your first job party. But I simply can’t do it. I have to go back home. My parents will find out. I will be in a tough spot,’ I retorted.

‘How long will you live under the fear of your parents? It’s your life, man! Grow up!’ he screamed in an irritated tone.

‘Well, it’s not about living under pressure or fear. I just can’t afford to make them feel embarrassed about me. Apart from that, my parents are not as liberal as yours. Your parents are different,’ I re-joined as I tried to remain calm.

‘Different? What do you imply? That my parents have spoiled me; that I am a rich and spoiled brat,’ he said, his eyes showing anger.

‘Let it be, guys! Stop fighting like dogs over this issue,’ Rajeev interrupted us.

‘No, it’s not just about today. This guy doesn’t seem to have any sense of what it means to be committed to friendship,’ Shreyash continued.

‘Maybe, you take me for granted. You expect too much from me,’ I uttered, looking away.

‘What about me, ha? Two years back, I parted ways with Poornima simply because you disliked her attitude. What about me? Just look at him, I take him for granted,’ he countered.

‘What made you bring this up here? So, you have been nurturing this guilt in your heart during these two years,’ I replied, looking directly into his eyes.

‘You compelled me to bring this up. It’s to make you realize what it means to be friends,’ he put forth with apparent rage.

One more word from Shreyash and I would have punched him in the face. I got so angry that I kicked the table forcefully and all the stuff fell down on the floor. I didn’t care to look Shreyash in the eye. I darted out of the restaurant and came back home.

As soon as I reached home, I switched off my mobile and went straight to my bedroom. I tried hard to sleep that night, but I couldn’t. I switched on my phone again, deleted Shreyash’s phone number from my

phonebook; I deleted all the chat history between us on *WhatsApp*. I thought of blocking his number, but I just switched my phone off and tried to sleep again.

So, after fifteen days, this good-morning-picture hurled me down the memory lane. What I had been trying to bury under the ground of oblivion appeared like the mythical phoenix and threw my life out of order again. Shreyash started texting me regularly: But the texts were nothing but sweet nothings. I didn't reply to his pleasantries, though. He called me a few times, but I rejected all his calls.

Finally, one day I received a call from an unknown number. It was Shreyash.

'Divakar, don't hang up on me, please. I just wanna meet you today at 9 PM at our gymnasium when most of them will be gone. Just once. Please, don't say "no",' he pleaded.

I obliged just to see what he was up to this time. I wanted to vent out my anger; all these days I was looking for an outlet. And, this was the day I thought.

At 9 PM, I found Shreyash sitting on a chair at the gymnasium. There was none but the two of us. Shreyash, as usual, embraced me and sat me down. He stood up and started looking at the ceiling.

'I know you have been seething with anger all these days. I know you want to say many things. That's why I have devised this strategy where we both will be given equal audience. We will be given fifteen minutes each to say whatever we want. And as for who starts first, I will be tossing a coin. Heads or Tails?' he spoke very delicately.

'What the heck! What rubbish is this? Are you crazy? I am going back home,' I shot back in exasperation.

'Please! Just once. Final showdown,' he requested.

'Okay, tell me! But, hurry up! I haven't come here to hear your dramatic monologue,' I said.

‘Once Charles Lamb said, “It is the privilege of friendship to talk nonsense, and to have her nonsense respected.” And on that note, let me start. Okay, I know we fought, and quite like dogs. And that too over an issue that might be or might not be close to my heart. But the thing is that we fought. I said things that I shouldn’t have. I shouldn’t have brought up the issue of my ex-girlfriend. But I did. But, don’t think that I still miss her, okay. You, on your part, said things that were uncalled for. Like ‘taken for granted’ thing. I never take you for granted, man. And, you shouldn’t have kicked the table like that. You know, we had to clean up the mess. I respect your space, I always do. You too have flaws not unlike me. But as a famous American radio host, Bernard Meltzer, once said, “A true friend is someone who thinks that you are a good egg even though he knows that you are slightly cracked.” And, my friend, there is a difference between friends and best friends. You know, I stumbled upon a picture today that said, “FRIENDS BUY YOU A LUNCH. BEST FRIENDS EAT YOUR LUNCH.” Okay, that’s it. Now, it’s your turn,’ he articulated in a way as if he were a character on the stage.

Shreyash had his speech prepared. And he sounded so funny. I didn’t have words to vent out my anger. Perhaps, I wasn’t angry anymore. I wanted to smile. But, I resisted the urge. I kept sitting on my chair. I didn’t stand up for the final showdown.

‘When will you join the company?’ I tried to change the topic.

‘Within a month, bro. And when I get my first salary, we will have a blast. Tequila, vodka, whisky, and whatnot,’ he chirped like a schoolboy.

After he said these words, he looked at me apprehensively. I was smiling. Then, we both were smiling.

\*\*\*

\***Akshat Shukla** is a research scholar at CSJM University, Kanpur, India. He is working on Ecocriticism for his research thesis. Apart from research writing, he writes poetry and fiction. His writings draw on his personal experiences. He can be reached at [akshatshukla2012@gmail.com].