

Reject's Club

We begin with me looking at a piece of paper and at a building's name, as most new things start, and adventures begin. Yep, this seems to be the building. 2nd floor, it said. Well, let's climb and see. Darn, my heart is throbbing faster than usual, as it does with anything remotely connected with love. As I knock on the door, the throbbing increases, and I fear my cheeks will flush any moment. It's more embarrassing when a man's cheeks blush than when a woman's do: for a woman, it might even be called cute.

Anyway, the door opens, and I feel like Stanley entering Livingstone's cabin... "The Reject's club, I presume?"

Heck, I should have resisted the temptation.

"Yeah, you presume correctly", the man says.

Not many have heard of Stanley's words, I presume.

"Come in." He's tall and dark... he seems to be the organiser. What was his name... Mr. Kunal.

"Mr. Kunal?"

"Yeah. Come in. Remove your *chappals* here. Sit down wherever you want."

I look into the medium-sized room: about fifteen people, seated not quite neatly, on the floor. By instinct, I scan any new group of people for the most beautiful girl, and there she was, seated in the second row. Right now everyone is smiling at me, welcoming me. It's strange how fake smiles welcome you into every group you approach. I smile the best I can, overdoing it a little. And sit down in the front row, beside a guy who was typing on his laptop.

"This is Rajesh Kumar from the Times of India." Kunal said to me. "They're going to have an article on the Reject's Club this Sunday. And Mr. Rajesh, this is..."

He looks at me, and I gaze blankly at him for ten seconds. Oh, I'm supposed to say my name.

"Vineel Dhakne", I utter quickly. Rarely do I get introduced to anyone this way.

"Well, Vineel, you came ten minutes late. But, Smita just finished narrating the details of her week." He looked at a girl of about twenty in the fourth row. "Now, maybe you should introduce yourself."

Right. Introduction. He said 'maybe'... so I should say no. Not now. Later, when I get a feel of this club. But somehow, my ego does not listen to my mind. "Yeah, sure." I blurt out.

Now I have to introduce myself. I stand up, dust my pants. The Times guy is looking ardently at me: I'm sure he'll start *his* article in this way:

"Hello, I'm Rahul (name changed to protect privacy)", he started. In the densely filled small room, Rahul was introducing himself to a small group of people. This is the rejects club, where rejects like Rahul come to cry over their misfortunes...

Ok, I ventured into self-parody there. Anyway, I start introducing myself. Ill try to do it with flair, in case I get featured in the Times. "My love story is pretty straightforward: boy sees girl, likes her beyond measure, she notices him drooling over her, he asks her out, she snubs him, he cries." I guess I should stop the self-parodying, but can't help. It's my nature.

The men and women in the room are looking at me, smiling softly. Those smiles aren't fake, and aren't smiles of pity; they're smiles of understanding. I begin to feel comfortable. Maybe I should tell them my story in some detail.

"Well, actually, there was this girl called Geeta, whose name I've changed to protect privacy. (I wink at the journo.) She was in my class at college, and I really loved her. I would talk to her in class, and she'd like talking to me too. Of course, she was surrounded by many other boys too, and she loved the attention. I was just another boy to her, now I think.

"Well, after about five months, I asked her out. She didn't get angry, really, but just got annoyed. A little embarrassed too, maybe, although now I think it was feigned. Anyway, she said no (I avoid the word "rejected", in case they think I'm trying to be a "member" too soon) and since then, she's been avoiding me. I've cried, tried to get away, but no use. So I decided to come here."

I stop talking, and look at the audience. It's annoying when you expect feedback and get none. I guess my story is quite common, and although they understand, they have nothing to ask.

"Thanks, Vineel. We can all appreciate your story." Kunal breaks the silence. "As you can imagine, that's quite a common theme with us, the synopsis which you stated at the start. We have talked about this often here, and we have quite some thoughts about it. You can talk about it with the others. "

I look at the fifteen seated persons. Not one gives a hint that he or she wants to talk to me. Kunal sensed that, and with the air of having done this several times before, he said, "I should give you a partner, so you get more comfortable with us."

"Partner"? What is this, school camp? Anyway, if you're going to choose a partner, choose the girl in the second row. *Pleeeeeease*. "Hmm, go sit next to Swetha" he said, pointing to... her!! Good luck seems to have found me finally in Rejects club. More like Lonelyhearts Anonymous, though. I sit down besides her. She isn't as beautiful as she seemed from far, but she greets me with a warm smile, which almost makes me blush.

The temptation to ask her, "What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?" is almost too hard to resist, but it's not that I learnt nothing from the Livingstone episode. But I must start conversation with her, right? She's my partner (chuckle) after all. I'd start with my story I just narrated, but it'd be too pathetic. Her earrings are nice, hmm... but talking about them would be too gay. Sigh. I'll just sit quietly until I come up with something to speak about.

For half an hour, I've been sitting here, listening to the stories of loveloss (if that's a word), and rejection. Insult. Agony. Pain. Tears. In fact, a more profound thinker than me would be delighted sinking in the abyss of human emotion. Not me. But I'm relieved to see that others share the experiences and emotions that I have gone through. Oh, and I can see how utterly pathetic I have been.

Then it hits me. I ask Swetha, "What's your story?"

She looks blankly at me for ten seconds. Again I can see how stupid I look. Oh, not that she looks stupid... she's the prettiest woman in the room. Graceful. With sparkling eyes. But all I can think of in describing her falls into the category of language usually termed "cliche". Maybe later, I'll think of a sublimely poetic description of the fair maiden. Chuckle.

"Oh, you mean, my own story... of why I am here?"

"Yeah. What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?" I admit it, I didn't say it with the flair that the words deserve. But she giggled. Wow, she actually got it. I know, it's high time I stopped underestimating others.

"Oh, er, my story is ... nothing." She looked down, with a simple smile. "It's nothing

you haven't heard before."

"But what is it?" My curiosity gets hold of me sometimes, and I end up being impolite.

"No, no, you don't want to hear it." She looks away, as if it's the end of the conversation. An end to the conversation is not what I have in mind, really. But it takes me a minute to come up with a new topic.

Meanwhile, Kunal is talking about how hard it is to find love, and why we shouldn't be dejected. He even wrote a poem on it, it seems, which he is currently recited. It starts with "Oh, love, thou hasn't..." 'Nuff said.

"Did you see how badly India lost in the world cup?" I ask Swetha. Can never go wrong with *this*. Everyone has an opinion on this.

"No, I don't watch cricket." Oops. Maybe not. I'd try to follow tis topic, but it'll go nowhere. To all you young boys out there, looking to woo girls: *Don't* follow me.

"What do you do, then?" I ask her. I have a habit of staring into a person's face during the conversation, while she doesn't seem to. I hope she doesn't find it weird to have me staring at her. Most girls find it flattering. But then most girls I flatter so don't end up in Rejects club.

"Yeah." She smiles. "I like to read Classics. You know, Dickens, Jane Austen..."

"Yeah, I've read Dickens. Oliver Twist." Probably that's when I started asking for 'more' rejections. Oh, that's a joke. Dare not say it loud.

"Yeah, but Oliver Twist is... what do I call it... a little too deep."

"Oh, is it? I never saw any depth in it. By nature I am oblivious to any artistic..."

By the time the club meeting ended, we were nicely chatting about books, movies (about which we had a common passion) and India's performance in the world cup. Kids, you just *may* follow me. But don't anyway.

I have been looking forward to meeting her again for a week. Stupidly, I didn't even ask her mobile number last time. I concede that it was an oversight, as I was blinded by her beautiful eyes, but I do have an excuse: But what reason could I have cooked up for asking it? I wiggle out.

And today is the day I've been looking forward to. Today is the day I see her again, talk to her again. See that smile in her eyes again. I think I have fallen in love again, but I better not think about it. She is only a good friend. She is only a good friend. Right.

I climb to the second floor again. Hmm... Kunal has replaced the door. The newer one is cooler. I guess one of the rejects got mad and broke the door at the Sunday yoga class, which I am too lazy to attend anyway. Who has a yoga class in a Rejects' club?

<Tring> <Tring>

Some shabby looking lady opens the door.

"Is Kunal there?"

"Who Kunal?"

"Isn't there supposed to be a Club meeting?"

"What club? Who're you?"

"Oh, Supervillians club. Never mind."

Door slams in face.

Why isn't there a club meeting? How come this lady doesn't know Kunal? Could they have seen that two of their members were falling in love and conspired never to let it happen? Evil.

Conspiracy.

Evil.

This is wrong. Sheerly Wrong.

"Hey, Vineel. What're you doing down here. Second floor, you know."

This is the wrong floor. Ah. Damn, I smelt a wicked mystery to solve there.

The meeting begins as usual. Most of the members share their experiences over the past week. In summary, a dog bit Arvind. That's it. No one dared to approach another girl. Some met new girls, but dared not speak. Loser's club. In introspect, I did not approach any girl either. Sigh. But what're the odds that you meet new girls every week? I don't know why we have such sessions. Damn, I used 'we'. I'm beginning to identify with these fellows.

"Now it's Swetha's turn." Kunal said. "I guess she won't telling us about her experiences, as usual?"

"Nothing at all happened, as usual." Swetha said.

Kunal moved on to his own experiences. I don't know when my turn is.

I cannot help it, I stare at Swetha. She is looking even more radiant than last week. Is this a sign? She looks at me. Her eyes, with Kajal applied to them, are looking even more beautiful than anything my wickedly imaginative brain could think of in my dreams about her.

"Why don't you share your experiences?" I ask her.

"Because there is nothing to share. Tell me honestly, what happened in your week?"

"Um... there was this one incident where I almost lost a 500-rupee note." Yeah. It was scary, and I almost discovered whether restaurants really make you wash the dishes when you have no money.

"Almost. See? Nothing happens in the week." Swetha concluded with a smile on her face.

"Well, Smita hasn't come back this week. We can assume something good has happened to her."

"I guess all of us come back because nothing happens to us. Ironic that these sessions should happen!" She said.

"Well, I met you last week. That's one big happening. And I came back." I almost added 'for you'.

She smiles. "Same here."

When my turn came, I recited the 500-rupee incident in all it's gory detail, with a large dose of self-parody. I could see Swetha was laughing. Wow, she got my jokes.

It's called discovering a gem. After my recital, I've become more and more confident in my self-deprecation as I speak to Swetha. And she gets every goddamn one of my jokes. I can almost see where this is leading me, and I have no reason to resist. As if I can stop myself anyway.

The class... I mean... club meeting gets over (Sorry, but I'm feeling like I'm back in school again, falling in love with the prettiest girl in class.) There are no extensive thank you's today, for there are no reporters. Our club has not appeared in the Times anyway, so we might get the reporter back here as a member. The end is a bit climatic, with what Julie sobbing and telling us we were the only friends she had.

I walk out of the building right behind Swetha, but she turns to leave as we exited the gate.

"See you next week, hopefully."

Ah, I can't let go. I can't, I can't. And she's still looking at me, presumably waiting for my goodbye.

"Swetha, do you want to have an ice-cream?"

"Oh. I don't know if..." She says. Don't say that. She looks at her watch, and I look at her face hopefully. You've *got* time, right? Of course you've got time. Yes? No?

"Yeah, let's go. but I won't stay for more than 30 minutes."

"I won't force you to." I smile at her, and we start walking towards the Naturals at the corner.

I shouldn't look at her so much, but I am. As I said, she doesn't have the habit of looking at the other person's face too much, which is a double advantage really, as she can't see my staring, and I'm nowhere as good-looking as her anyway.

The AC in the ice-cream shop is blowing right on me as I take a seat. I love the feeling of cold you get when there's an AC around, and I can feel the sun shining on me nevertheless as his daughter sits beside me. Sorry, I'm getting very poetic (and I know how bad it is, which is why I'm not trying to flirt poetically with Swetha).

"Which flavour will you have?" I asked her.

"You choose it for me. I rarely have ice-cream."

"Oh. I love ice-cream. Butterscotch is my favourite, but if you like chocolate, you can have chocolate, it'll be good." I told her.

"I'll go with butterscotch, I'm sure I'll like it too."

Wow. Is *that* a sign or what.

We have our ice-creams, and it turns out she watched the match yesterday, because I piqued her interest in cricket last time. I'm beginning to feel proud of myself.

We finish, and we come back on the street. (The bill was on me, which I'm happy to pay. Nothing can pay for the time I spend with her, after all.) I can sense the separation again. What can I possibly do to avoid it?

"Swetha," I say as I see her look towards the side of the road where she is supposed to go. "Will you go on a date with me?" She looks stunned. "A proper date."

"Vineel..."

"Look, I love your company. You get all my jokes. We are able to talk about anything with each other. I don't think we're qualified to be in a Loser's Club like that anymore. We should date."

Still bearing a stunned look, that beautiful face. Does it look less beautiful when stunned, or am I biased because of what follows?

"Er, Vineel..." she begins.

Ending I

"I don't think I'm ready to be in a relationship again. I'm sorry. We can be good friends."

What? I don't believe she's saying this. I absolutely don't believe it. We had such chemistry. And she knows my pain. She knows the pain of rejection, and yet she's doing this. I could never do it.

"Oh... Oh," I stammer, searching for words. It's my turn to be stunned. "See you next week, then?"

"I don't know." She turns and leaves.

What the heck? How did I allow this to happen? Why the fuck do I fall in love so soon anyway? I guess I shouldn't have confessed.

I wave to her seated in the bus, but she isn't looking back. There's a newspaper lying on the street, and I pick it up absent-mindedly. *The Rejects' Club*. So they did publish the article. I have no patience to read through it, but I notice it ends with a mention of next week's article: Rejects² Inc. Rejects² ?

I look at the address on the paper, and the building. It's the right place. No lift, and have to climb to the 3rd floor on foot. The door looks as dreary as the other, older one. I ring the bell.

"Is this Rejects power two? More power to rejects?" I ask.

"Yep. You called yesterday, right?" A short fat man says.

"Yeah. Vineel. You must be..."

"Charlie. Come in."

I should resist the temptation. I should, I should. I can't.

"I coulda been a reject, Charlie. I coulda been somebody, but a reject square is all I am, let's face it." I say to the ten or so members sitting on the floor. They don't get it. That was the best Brando imitation this side of Robert Deniro.

My eye, by default, searches for the most beautiful woman in class, and there she is. Long, black locks and dark skin, and eyes staring directly at me. "Vineel," says Humphrey, "go and sit next to..." I wait with baited breath.

Finis Uno.

Ending Two

(Continuing from "Er, Vineel..." which Swetha said.)

"I have something to confess to you." She comes closer to me, and holds my hand. "But promise you won't tell anyone."

"I won't."

"I'm married."

"What? How? And the..."

"I was unhappy with my married life, and I thought I'd get some desperate boy in a club like that."

"I'm not desperate! Not all rejects are desperate!" I try to assure... myself, really. "I don't believe you. You can get men anywhere, you don't have to go to Rejects' Clubs to get men!"

She sits down on the bench outside the shop, and I sit down beside her. She tries to explain her move.

"I just wanted to try. To experiment. To... to do something silly, weird and all that."

I just look at her for a minute.

"Well, you've succeeded." I manage to say finally.

"What do you plan to do now?" Really. So do I get to have an illicit affair with a married woman, which is interesting but will plague me day and night, or do I go in search of a Rejects Squared club?

"I don't know."

"That can't be the answer, Swetha. Are we going to meet again, have lunch, dinner, ice-cream, shev puri, whatever?"

"Do you want to?"

Morality. Always gets in the way of something like this. "I... don't know."

"Now do I tell you that you cannot not know? That it cannot be the answer."

"Then, I guess, the answer is no. Morally. Really."

I have tears in my eyes, but cannot help it.

She touches my chin with her soft fingers. "Here's looking at you, kid."

I'm sure she was the only one who got my Livingstone reference.

I was happier when I was a reject.

Finish Dous