





*It's a typical night at the call centre,  
One complaining customer after another.  
And, as if that wasn't bad enough, Shyam has to  
sit opposite Priyanka, the girl who's just dumped  
him, as well as deal with Bakshi, his insufferable  
supervisor. But on this night of  
a thousand calls, when life couldn't look more  
uninspiring for Shyam and his friends, a unique  
caller gets on the line.  
And changes everything—for ever.*

## Prologue

The Kanpur–Delhi night train was the most memorable journey of my life. Firstly, it gave me the idea for my book. Secondly, it is not every day you sit in an empty compartment and a young, pretty girl walks in.

Yes, you see it in the movies, you hear about it from friends' friends, but it never happens to you. In most cases I shared my compartment with talkative aunts, snoring men and wailing infants. But this night was different. Firstly, my compartment was empty: this new summer train had only just started running and nobody knew about it. Secondly, I was unable to sleep.

I had been to the Indian Institute of Technology in Kanpur to give a talk. Before leaving, I sat in the canteen chatting with the students and drank four cups of coffee, which no doubt led to my insomnia. I had no magazines or books to read and could hardly see anything out of the window in the darkness. I prepared myself for a dull and silent night.

She walked in five minutes after the train had left the station. She opened the curtains of my enclosure and looked around puzzled.

'Is this coach A4, seat 63E?' she asked.

The yellow light bulb in my compartment flickered as I looked up at her.

'Huh?' I said. It was difficult to withdraw from the gaze of her eyes.

'Actually, it is. My seat is right in front of you.' She answered her own question and heaved her heavy suitcase onto the upper berth. She sat down opposite me and sighed with relief.

'I got into the wrong coach,' she said, adjusting her countless

ringlets. She was young, perhaps early to mid-twenties, and her waist-length hair had a life of its own. I couldn't yet see her face in the bad light, but I could tell one thing—she was pretty. And her eyes—once you looked into them, you couldn't turn away. I kept my gaze down.

'So, this is a pretty empty train,' she said after ten minutes.

'Yes,' I said. 'It's the new holiday special. They've just started it.' I leaned forward. 'Hi. I am Chetan, by the way, Chetan Bhagat.'

'Hi,' she said. 'Chetan . . . your name sounds familiar.'

Now this was cool. It meant she had heard of my first book. I'm rarely recognised, and never by a girl on a night train.

'You might have heard of my book, *Five Point Someone*. I'm the author.'

'Oh yes,' She paused. 'Oh yes, of course. I've read your book. About the three underperformers and the professor's daughter, right?'

'Yes. So, did you like it?'

'It was all right.'

I was taken aback. I could have done with a little more of a compliment.

'Just all right?' I said, fishing a bit too obviously.

'Well . . .' she said, and paused.

'Well what?' I said after ten seconds.

'Well, yeah, just all right. An OK-OK type of book.'

I kept quiet. She noticed the expression of mild disappointment on my face.

'Nice to meet you, Chetan. Where are you coming from? IIT Kanpur?'

'Yes,' I said, my voice less friendly than before. 'I had to give a talk there.'

'Oh really? About what?'

'About my book—you know, the OK-OK-type one. Some people do want to hear about it,' I said, using a sweet tone to coat my sarcasm.

'Interesting,' she said, and went quiet again.

I was quiet too. I didn't want to speak to her any more. I wanted my empty compartment back.

'Is everything OK?' she asked softly.

'Yes, why?' I said.

'You're upset about what I said about your book, aren't you?'

'Not really,' I said.

She laughed. I looked at her. Her smile was as arresting as her eyes. I knew she was laughing at me, but I wanted her to keep smiling.

'Listen. I know your book did well. You are a sort of youth writer and everything. But at one level . . .'

'What?' I said.

'At one level, you are hardly a youth writer.'

I looked at her for a few seconds. Her eyes had a soft but insistent gaze.

'I thought I wrote a book about college kids. Isn't that youth?' I said.

'Yeah, right. So you wrote a book on the Indian Institute of Technology, an elite place where few people get to go. You think that represents the youth?' she asked.

'So what are you trying to say? I had to start somewhere, so I wrote about my college experiences. And the story isn't all about IIT. It could have happened anywhere. Is that why you're trashing my book?'

'I'm not trashing it. I'm just saying it hardly represents Indian youth.'

'So what represents youth exactly?' I said.

'I don't know. You're the writer. You figure it out,' she said.

'That's not fair,' I said. I sounded like a five-year-old throwing a tantrum. She saw me grumbling to myself and smiled.

'Are you going to write another book?' she said a few seconds later.

'I'll try to.'

'What is the subject of your second novel?'

I turned to look at her carefully for the first time. Maybe it was the time of night, but she was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen. Everything about her was perfect. I tried to concentrate on her question.

'Second novel? I haven't thought of a subject yet,' I said.

'Really? Don't you have any ideas?'

'I do. But nothing certain.'

'Inte . . . resting,' she drawled. 'Well, just bask in the success of your first book, then.'

We kept quiet for the next half an hour. I took out the contents of my overnight bag and rearranged them for no particular reason. I wondered if it even made sense to change into nightwear. I wasn't going to fall asleep.

'I might have a story idea for you,' she said, startling me.

'Huh?' I was wary of what she was going to say. 'What is it?'

'It's a story about a call centre.'

'Really?' I said. 'Call centres as in "business process outsourcing centres"?'

'Yes. Do you know anything about them?'

I thought about it. I did know about call centres, mostly from my cousins who worked in one.

'Yes, I know something,' I said. 'Some three hundred thousand people work in the industry. They help US and European companies in the sales, service and maintenance of their operations. Usually younger people work there in night shifts. Quite interesting, actually.'

'Just interesting? Have you ever thought of what they all have to face?'

'Uh, not really,' I said.

'Why? Aren't they the youth? Don't you want to write about them?' She was almost scolding me.

'Listen, let's not start arguing again.'

'I'm not arguing. I told you that I have a call-centre story for you.'

I looked at my watch. It was 12.30 a.m. A story would not be such a bad idea to kill time.

'Let's hear it, then,' I said.

'I'll tell you, but I have a condition,' she said.

Condition? 'What? That I don't tell it to anyone else?' I asked.

'No. Just the opposite. You have to promise to use it for your second book.'

'What?' I said. 'Are you kidding? I can't promise that.'

'It's up to you,' she said and turned silent.

'Can't I decide after you've told me the story?' I asked. 'If it's interesting, I may do it. But how can I decide without hearing it first?'

'No. This is not about choice. If I tell you, you have to use it,' she said. 'As if it's your own story. I'll give you the contacts of the people in the story. You can meet them, do your research, but make it your second book.'

'Well, then, I think it's better if you don't tell me,' I said.

'OK,' she said and turned quiet again. She got up to spread a bed sheet on her berth, and then arranged her pillow and blanket.

I checked my watch again. It was 1.00 a.m. and I was still wide awake. She switched off the flickering yellow light. Now the only light in the compartment was an eerie blue one; I couldn't figure out where the bulb was.

As she was sliding under her blanket, I asked, 'What is the story about? At least tell me a little bit more.'

'Will you do it then?'

I shrugged in the semi-darkness. 'Can't say. Don't tell me the story yet, just tell me what it's about.'

She sat up. Folding her legs beneath her, she began talking. 'All right,' she said, 'it's a story about six people in a call centre on one night.'

'Just one night? Like this one?' I interrupted.

'Yes, one night.'

'Are you sure that could fill a whole book? I mean, what's so special about this night?'

She heaved a sigh and took a sip from her bottle of mineral water.

'You see,' she said, 'it wasn't like any other night. It was the night of the phone call.'

'What?' I said and burst out laughing. 'So a call centre gets a phone call. That's the special part?'

She did not smile back. She waited for me to stop laughing and then continued as if I hadn't said anything. 'You see, it wasn't an ordinary phone call. It was the night . . . it was the night there was a phone call from God.'

Her words made me spring to attention. 'What?'

'You heard me. That night there was a phone call from God,' she said.

'What exactly are you talking about?'

'I'm not telling you any more. Now you know what it's about, if you want to hear the story, you know my condition.'

'It's a tough condition,' I said.

'I know. It's up to you,' she said and lay down and closed her eyes.

Six people. One night. Call centre. Call from God. The phrases kept repeating themselves in my head as another hour passed. At 2.00 a.m. she woke up to have a sip of water.

'Listen,' I said. 'Get up.'

'Huh?' she said, rubbing her eyes. 'Why?'

'Tell me the story,' I said.

'So you'll write it?'

'Yes,' I said, with a slight hesitation.

'Good,' she said, and sat up again in her cross-legged position.

For the rest of the night, she told me the story that begins below. I chose to tell the story through Shyam's eyes because, after I met him, I realised he was the most similar to me as a person. The rest of the people, and what happened that night, well, I'll let Shyam tell you.



8.31 p.m.

I was splashing my hands helplessly in the sea. I can't even swim in a pond, let alone in the Indian Ocean. While I was in the water, my boss Bakshi was in a boat next to me. He was pushing my head down in the water. I saw Priyanka drifting away in a lifeboat. I screamed as Bakshi used both his hands to keep my head submerged. Salt water was filling my mouth and nostrils when I heard loud beeps in the distance.

My nightmare ended as my cellphone alarm rang hard in my left ear and I woke up to its 'Last Christmas' ringtone. The ringtone was a gift from Shefali, my new semi-girlfriend. I squinted through a half-shut eye to see 8.32 p.m. surrounded by little bells flashing on the screen. 'Damn,' I said and jumped out of bed.

I would have loved to analyse my dream and its significance in my insignificant life, but I had to get dressed for work.

Man, the Qualis will be here in twenty minutes, I thought. Qualis was the make of car that picked us all up individually and drove us to the centre. I was still tired, but afraid of staying in bed any longer in case I was late.

By the way, I am Shyam Mehra, or Sam Marcy as they call me at my workplace, the Connexions call centre in Gurgaon. American tongues have trouble saying my real name and prefer Sam.

Anyway, I'm a call-centre agent. There are hundreds of thousands, probably millions of agents like me. But this total pain-in-the-neck author chose me, of all the agents in the country. He met me and told me to help him with his second book. In fact, he pretty much wanted me to write the book for him. I declined, saying I can't even write my own CV, so there was no way I could write a whole book. I explained to him how my promotion to the position of team leader had been postponed for one year because my manager Bakshi had told me that I don't have the 'required skills set' yet. In my review, Bakshi wrote that I was 'not a go-getter'. I don't even know what 'go-getter' means, so I guess I'm definitely not one.

But this author said he didn't care. He had promised someone he'd write this story so I'd better cooperate or he would keep on pestering

me. I tried my best to wriggle out of it, but he wouldn't let go. I finally relented and that's why I'm stuck with this assignment, while you are stuck with me.

Now let's get back to the story. If you remember, I had just woken up.

THERE WAS A NOISE in the living room. Some relatives were in town to attend a family wedding. My cousin was getting married to his neighbour. But I had to work, so I couldn't go to the wedding. It didn't matter, though, all marriages are the same, more or less.

I reached the bathroom still half-asleep. It was occupied.

The bathroom door was open. I saw five of my aunts scrambling to get a few square inches of the washbasin mirror. One aunt had lost the little screw of her gold earring and was flipping out.

'It's pure gold, where is it?' she screamed.

'Auntie, can I use the bathroom for five minutes? I need to get ready for the office,' I said.

'Oh, hello, Shyam. Woke up finally?' my mother's sister said.

'Office? Aren't you coming to the wedding?'

'No, I have to work. Can I have the bath—'

'Look how big Shyam has become,' my maternal aunt said. 'We need to find a girl for him soon.'

Everyone burst into giggles. It was their biggest joke of the day.

'Can I please—' I said.

'Shyam, leave the ladies alone,' one of my cousins interrupted. 'What are you doing here with the women? We are already late for the wedding.'

'But I have to go to work. I need to get dressed,' I protested.

'Use the kitchen sink,' an aunt suggested and handed me my toothbrush.

I gave them all a dirty look. Nobody noticed. I passed by the living room on my way to the kitchen. The uncles were on their second whisky and soda. One uncle said something about how it would be better if my father were still alive and around this evening.

I reached the kitchen. There was no hot water so my face froze as I washed it with cold water. Winter in Delhi is a bitch. I brushed my teeth and combed my hair. Shyam had turned into Sam and Sam's day had just begun.

I was hungry, but there was nothing to eat. They'd be getting food at the wedding, so my mother felt there was no need to cook at home.

The Qualis's horn screamed at 8.55 p.m.

I tried to find my mother. She was in her bedroom, lost among aunts, saris and jewellery sets. I waved a goodbye to everyone, but no one acknowledged me. It wasn't surprising. My cousins are all on their way to becoming doctors or engineers. You could say I am the black sheep of my family. You see, I used to work in the website department of an ad agency before this call-centre job. However, the ad agency paid really badly, and all the people there were pseudos, more interested in office politics than websites. I left and all hell broke loose at home. That's when I became the black sheep. I saved myself by joining Connexions. With money in your wallet the world gives you some respect. Connexions was also the natural choice for me as Priyanka worked there. Of course, that reason was no longer relevant.

The Qualis's horn screamed again.

'I'm coming,' I shouted as I ran out of the house.

### 9.05 p.m.

'What, sahib. Late again?' the driver said as I took the front seat.

'Sorry, sorry. Shall we go to Military Uncle's first?' I panted to the driver.

'Yes,' he replied, looking at his watch.

'Can we get to the call centre by ten p.m.? I have to meet someone before their shift ends,' I said.

'Depends if your colleagues are on time,' the driver replied laconically. 'Anyway, let's pick up the old man first.'

Military Uncle hates it if we are late. I prepared myself for some dirty looks. His tough manner comes from his days in the Army, from which he retired a few years ago. At fifty plus he is the oldest person in the call centre. I don't know him well, but I do know that he used to live with his son and daughter-in-law before he moved out—for which read thrown out—to be on his own. His pension was meagre, and he tried to supplement it by working in the call centre. However, he hates to talk and is not a voice agent. He sits on the solitary online chat and email station. His desk is in a far corner near the fax machine. Most of his interactions with us are limited to giving us condescending 'you young people' glances.

The Qualis stopped outside his house. He was waiting at the entrance.

'You're late,' Uncle said, looking at the driver.

Without answering, the driver got out to open the Qualis's back

door. Uncle climbed in and sat at the back. He gave me an it-must-be-your-fault look. I looked away. The driver took a U-turn to go to Radhika's house.

One of the unique features about my team is that we not only work together, we also share the same Qualis. Through a bit of route planning and the recruitment of an agreeable driver, we ensured that my Western Appliances Strategic Group all came and left together. There are six of us: Military Uncle, Radhika, Esha, Vroom, Priyanka and me.

The Qualis moved on to Radhika Jha, or agent Regina Jones's house. As usual, Radhika was late.

'Radhika madam is too much,' the driver said, holding the horn down. I looked at my watch anxiously.

Six minutes later Radhika came running towards us, clutching the ends of her maroon shawl in her right hand.

'Sorry, sorry sorry . . .' she said before we could say anything.

'What?' I asked her as the Qualis moved on again.

'Nothing. I was making almond milk for my mother-in-law and it took longer than I thought to crush the almonds,' she said, leaning back exhausted in her seat in the middle.

'Ask Mother-in-law to make her own milk,' I suggested.

'C'mon, Shyam,' she said, 'she's so old, it's the least I can do.'

'Yeah, right,' I shrugged. 'Just that and cooking three meals a day and household chores and working all night and . . .'

'Don't talk about it,' she said. 'Any news on the call centre? I'm nervous.'

'Nothing new from what Vroom told me. Call volumes are at an all-time low—Connexions is doomed. It's just a question of when,' I said.

'Really?' Her eyes widened.

It was true. You might have heard of those swanky, new-age call centres where everything is hunky-dory, there are plenty of clients and agents get aromatherapy massages. Well, Connexions was not one of them. We were sustained by our one and only client, Western Computers and Appliances, and even their call flow had dwindled. Rumours that the call centre would collapse floated around every day.

The Qualis moved painfully slowly. It was a heavy wedding day in Delhi and on every street there was a procession. We edged forward as the driver dodged several fat grooms on their over-burdened horses.

'I need this job. Anuj and I need to save,' Radhika said, more to