

IT'S YOUR MOVE, WORDFREAK!

Excerpt © Falguni Kothari

I... N... S... A... N... I... T... Y...

“Now there’s a perfect bingo, *kutty!*” Alisha Menon admonished her towel-clad reflection in the full-length mirror adorning one buttercup yellow wall of her bedroom. The narcissistic contraption was encased in a broad wooden filigree frame inset with citrine stones. It was bold and beautiful.

The exact opposite of the image it outlined.

Alisha took stock of her reflection. Brown eyes rimmed with fatigue and dark circles. Pallid complexion. Ugh. She should make an effort to cover up the corpse-like skintone. Gaunt shoulders, courtesy of genetics and nature. She was definitely not one of the fairest in Mumbai—not that she wanted to be. She only ever aspired to be one of the smartest.

Ergo, how was it that everyone was suddenly doubting her intelligence?

“Stop it! You will not let them psych you. You’ve thought this through. You have a plan. Stick to it.” With a final narrow-eyed nod at herself, Alisha turned away from the mirror before she chickened out.

Plucking a bottle of moisturizer from the dresser, she walked to the bed and sat down to replenish her skin. It was late February, and the sliding windows in her room were open to the balmy evening air. Faint sounds of traffic from below and a louder *I’d like to move it, move it* wafted in like a rhythmic breeze. Little Chucky from next door was watching *Madagascar* yet again, she thought, grinning.

Looks didn't matter. Only smarts did.

"And I'd like to prove it, prove it," she rapped in time with the music.

She'd been feeling sluggish and out of sorts all day. Understandable, as she was still recovering from a bout of flu from last week. And if her hands trembled as they massaged cream into her pores, she put it down to a bonus from the mini epidemic. She refused to credit her nervousness to the Big Date she was getting all dolled up for.

Alisha's stomach dropped at the thought of the dinner date. She pressed a hand against her belly as if to hold it in place. Was she "off her rocker" to have agreed to meet Wordfreak as her best friend, Diya, so eloquently put it last night? Granted, she didn't know him well—not at all in reality. She only knew him by way of their intensely competitive, online Scrabble games, and fun and flirty chats. That he could very well be Jack the Ripper snaring his next hapless victim had been pointed out to her. But it did not feel like that. *He* did not feel like that.

Damn it. She wasn't going to second-guess her decision. She was going on the bloody date.

Arguably, how could a blind date be any less or more risky than a random meeting between two people on a dating App, or at a club or a party, or, for that matter, inside a book shop? Really, even a family-arranged match had to...

Her iPhone jingled a merry marimba tune, cutting off her thoughts and quickening her pulse. He'd changed his mind. He was calling to cancel, or—*Get a grip, Alisha. He doesn't have your phone number, remember?*

Alisha rolled her eyes at herself, then at the phone which displayed MOM in bold on the caller ID. She set the instrument aside without answering it, deciding that Savitri Menon could wait until morning to voice her angst—again—at her daughter's aberrant and imprudent behaviour. By tomorrow, Alisha figured that either she would be proved right and Wordfreak would be all that she hoped he would be—picture a taller, copiously younger version of Shah Rukh Khan. Or they—her mother, brother, best friend, neighbor and neighbor's dog—would be right and Alisha would have allowed her not-usually-impulsive-self to be mugged, raped, kidnapped, brutally murdered, or a combination thereof. They could all come and gloat while picking up her pieces.

Stop the insanity and just move it, move it! She was going to meet him, and that was that.

Stripping off the towel, Alisha donned the flowy blue dress she'd borrowed from her fashionista BFF. She turned this way and that, critiquing herself from every angle until she caught her own eyes again and grimaced. Diya would be so amused to see her like this—expectant, flustered. She wondered if she was going on the date just to prove a point. No, it wasn't. It was the promise of the man she'd met online. She needed to see if she'd been right.

Makeup application took two minutes flat. Practiced strokes of powdered foundation over her face, slashes of blush on her cheeks, colorless mascara curling her lashes, and a swipe of shiny sweet gloss on her lips.

Heels? Nope. What if he wasn't tall? Better stick with the flat silver Roman sandals as she stood five feet eight inches in her bare feet.

With one last critical look in the mirror, Alisha picked up her purse and stumbled out of her South Mumbai apartment with butterflies in her stomach and two possibilities.

The Uber rolled to a stop outside the pre-selected destination. Alisha paid the fare in cash, directed the tobacco-chewing Uber driver to keep the change, and climbed out of the incense-filled cab to take a long breath of fresh air. Although, Mumbai's air quality wasn't much of an improvement.

She checked her watch. She was a half-hour early. Perfect.

Red-brick walls flanked a pair of thick, wooden doors, making up the outer façade of the rustic-looking, yet trendy, little café on Juhu Road. A tiny sign on the right wall displayed its name: Mirch Masala Café. Giving her a lazy salute, a uniformed *chowkidaar* opened the doors, and Alisha walked into what was essentially a rain forest. The place had been designed in a plethora of earth tones—taupe, brown and green mingled with swirls of red, black and orange. Accent lighting added atmosphere to the lush paradise. A wet bar curved along the right side of the entrance, and every single bar stool was occupied. So were most of the tables. Not a surprise as the café was one of Mumbai's current hotspots.

To her left, a waterfall trickled into a rocky pool filled with fat orange fish. Flowers and foliage abounded—mini palm trees, orchids, daylilies and birds of paradise, all creatively arranged in gigantic ceramic planters and placed randomly around the café. Servers in crisp red and black uniforms were rushing to and fro from the kitchen at the back with practiced efficiency.

The restaurant's host smiled in welcome. "Good evening, Madam. Do you have a reservation?"

"Yes, it's under Wordfreak." Goodness, that sounded weird. She cleared her throat. "I'm early. I don't think he...um, my friend is here yet. But I wouldn't mind being seated now." By the time she finished speaking, her heart and stomach were doing summersaults. Seriously, why was she putting herself through this?

The host ran a finger across the reservation book in front of him. "Here's your reservation. Ah! Your party's here already. You won't have to wait, Madam." He smiled, looking pleased.

Alisha gaped at him. She could not have heard right. Did he say her party was here already? *Ohmygodohmygodohmygod!* Her organs were no longer flipping summersaults; they were trying to leap out of her body. She was going to pass out, surely.

"This way, Madam." The man spun on his heel and led her into the restaurant.

She followed like a robot, horrorstruck by the turn of events. *She* was supposed to have been the early one. It had been *her* plan to wait and observe and scam if Wordfreak looked even the least bit fishy. Now what was she supposed to do?

There she was!

Aryan Rajaram Chawla stared at the tall, striking woman in blue coming his way. He gulped water once, twice and then for a third time, hoping to ease his nerves. He was positive the woman was Worddiva. There she was, the phrase had leaped into his mind like an epiphany as soon as he'd seen her.

He stood up as she neared. Her eyes—irises a delicious dark chocolate brown—grew round and wide when she saw him. She looked surprised—no, she seemed as stunned as he was feeling.

"Madam." The restaurant host held her chair as she took her seat. Actually, Worddiva plopped down awkwardly because her eyes were glued to his.

Aryan sank into his own chair, drinking in the wonder of Worddiva. He hadn't expected her to be tall. They would look good together. Aryan felt an absurd urge to laugh at his good fortune. He cleared his throat, preparing to launch into the greeting he'd memorized. Her gaze sharpened on his face, and her lips—fuck. Her pink tongue snuck out and swiped over her

luscious lips. He was going to embarrass himself before he even said hello, he thought, as heat shot through his body.

He managed a watery “Hi!” without croaking, drooling or sliding into a brainless puddle.

Her answer was to close her eyes and mumble wordlessly. *Was she praying?* She also seemed to be having trouble breathing; her breaths were coming out in puffs.

“Isn’t this amaz...” he began, but was abruptly cut off when she bolted. There was no other word for it. She shot out of her chair and dashed to the other side of the room, dodging several waiters along the way, leaving him and everyone else gawking after her.

What just happened? Aryan snapped his mouth shut. Had she taken one look at him, decided she hated him and run straight home? But...*why?* Not to seem conceited, but he was considered a good catch. He was good-looking, mannerly, a charmer even. He’d never repelled a woman before.

Confused, Aryan looked down at her empty seat, and whooshed out a breath of relief when he spied a silver evening bag on the Wenge wood table. She hadn’t run if she’d left her bag. She’d simply needed to use the bathroom. But why hadn’t she just said so instead of scaring him half to death with her hit-and-run act? Women, Aryan shook his head philosophically, were from Venus. A man wasn’t meant to understand them.

She was lovely. Whatever he’d imagined Worddiva to look like, she surpassed all his expectations. She had a dusky rose complexion that looked amazing in the strappy blue dress. Her features were delicate, almost waif-like, for such a statuesque woman. And her eyes—those gorgeous chocolate eyes—had nearly swallowed her face as she’d stared at him.

The head server approached the table and Aryan returned his smile. “Sir, we have something new on the wine list. It will be to your taste,” said Baban.

Being a regular patron at the restaurant, Baban knew Aryan’s preferences well. The café was one of his go-to restaurants with an innovative farm-to-table menu, and when Worddiva had suggested they meet there, Aryan had thought it was serendipity. He wondered if she lived in the vicinity, or close by in Bandra, like him.

“Give me a few minutes. I don’t know what the lady wants yet,” Aryan replied.

“Take your time, Sir.” Baban left the menus on the table and vanished like a genie into a bottle. The service at the café was impeccable.

Aryan waited for Worddiva, drumming his fingers on the table whilst waiting. When that didn't help, he began passing his finger across the flame of the tea light in the middle of the table. Baban strolled in Aryan's direction again, but spun around and marched away when Aryan glowered.

He wondered if he should look in on her, ask if everything was okay. But no, if he knew anything at all, he knew she would not appreciate being fussed over. Worddiva was a fiercely independent lady.

When she eventually emerged from the bathroom, she looked refreshed and composed. Aryan felt his lips twitch in amusement. Serenity emanated from Worddiva's bearing. Gone were the shocked expression and uneven gait from before, she looked ready to take on the world.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she said, not looking apologetic in the least. She took her seat again, drawing the length of her gorgeous hair over one shoulder. "I wasn't well last week and...everything was just too much." She gulped down half a glass of water, primly wiping her mouth with a napkin, then finally, she looked him dead in the eye.

"You...are...Wordfreak, right?" she asked, clearly needing a verbal confirmation.

He was having a hard time believing his luck too, but he'd pinched himself already.

"I am. And no need to apologize. We all have our moments," he said, turning up the charm.

Worddiva's eyes flicked to his face, then she rolled them up to the ceiling, mocking herself or him or both of them. And just like that, she bowled him over.

This was the woman he had come to meet. *This* was the woman who had haunted his days, plagued his nights, for the last five months. The impish, politically incorrect yet socially driven, spectacularly funny female who had argued and debated and called him a fool so many times he'd lost count.

Their online chats were enchanting; their Scrabble competitions, exhilarating. She'd captivated him even before he'd laid eyes on her. And now? Now, she'd knocked him flat out.

"What's your name?" he demanded. He wanted to know. He *had* to know.

She leaned back in her chair, worrying her fleshy bottom lip as she considered his question. Had he sounded too harsh? Too aggressive?

"Let's leave it at Wordfreak and Worddiva for now. Just until it's a little less embarrassing?" she said.

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.” He wanted to kiss her. Didn’t she understand? How could he ask to kiss her if he didn’t even know her name?

“We are complete strangers. Of course it’s embarrassing.” Her cheeks pinkened.

Now he really wanted to haul her into his lap and kiss her senseless, their real names be damned. Jesus. Where had his inner Neanderthal been hiding? He’d always considered himself a gentleman.

“We’re hardly strangers after all the things we’ve chatted about in the last few months. I think we understand each other rather well.”

“That’s oversimplifying things. Chatting through the buffer of a computer doesn’t count. The reality...the physical reality of meeting you is a little overwhelming. For me, at least.” The chocolate pools of her eyes begged him to let it go.

“Fine. Have it your way. For now.”

Aryan squashed down his impatience because she was right. They were virtual strangers, even if they’d been chatting almost every night for the last few months. The anonymity that type of communication afforded had given them a false sense of security, an illusory level of comfort. They’d exchanged no names, no information, no personal baggage of any sort. It had been wonderfully freeing.

But now that he’d seen her, he couldn’t imagine going back to the...faceless, nameless dance they’d been performing.

“What will you have to drink?” Since Baban was hovering close enough to listen, he sprang to attention when Aryan spoke.

“I’ll start with a mushroom soup followed by the *paneer tikka* panini.” She’d given her order without bothering to open the menu, confirming his suspicion that she did indeed frequent the café.

“Nothing to drink? How about a white to go with the panini? Or would you prefer a cocktail?”

She shook her head. “Water’s fine. I...ah...rarely drink alcohol.”

Aryan blinked. Wow. He didn’t think he knew anyone who didn’t drink at least wine. “Got it,” he said, and proceeded to order a glass of Louis Jadot, Beaujolais ’07, at Baban’s recommendation, for himself, and his dinner choices—a garden vegetable soup and the chicken casserole.

“Is it a religious thing?” he asked as soon as Baban left. She completely fascinated him.

“It’s a my-body-cannot-tolerate-alcohol sort of thing,” she drawled, mischief lighting up her face.

The cheeky woman had imitated his faint but discernable Harry Potter accent, although very badly. “Well, that’s a shame, innit?” he teased back, winking at her.

She laughed outright, then shrugged. “I drink on occasion. It just doesn’t suit me. I get weird.”

“Ah.” Getting weird sounded like a lawsuit waiting to happen.

“I’m also a vegetarian.” She flicked the non sequitur at him like the stub of a finished cigarette.

God did have the strangest sense of humor. The perfect woman was sitting right in front of him, telling him that she wasn’t only imperfect but may be his polar opposite.

“Will you have a problem with the chicken at the table?”

“Not at all. Just thought I’d mention it.” Suddenly, her eyes narrowed on his face. “How old are you?”

Aryan clenched his jaw tight to keep from laughing. He knew where this was going. He already knew that Worddiva was twenty-eight, but he’d never disclosed his age to her. Very early in their games, she’d snidely remarked how stupid and childish men were in their twenties. Incapable of mature decisions and serious conversation, she’d said. So, he’d purposely hidden his own pitifully puerile age from her.

“Nearly twenty-six. Why?” A small white lie. He’d turned twenty-five only a month ago.

Now, she looked appalled. Aryan burst out laughing, thoroughly enjoying her dismay.

“Are you serious?” She looked ready to bolt again.

But he wasn’t going to let her escape. It had taken him two months to get her to meet him in person. She had better stay for the full date or he’d have to call fowl.

“It’s not a big deal.”

“Maybe not for you,” she retorted. “It is to me.”

“So I’m two years younger than you. So bloody what?” He arched his eyebrows.

“Three years. Goodness! You’re a baby!”

More like three and a half years, but he wasn’t admitting that, yet.

“Do you want to see how completely un-babyish I am?” The double entendre was crude, but he couldn’t help it. He was annoyed.

“Don’t be an ass. And you just proved my point with your infantile high school humor.” She raised an imperious eyebrow of her own as if to put him in his place.

Aryan threw up his hands. “What has age got to do with anything? Besides, you didn’t seem to mind my high school humor before. If I recall correctly, you happily participated in it.”

Their soups arrived, putting a welcome dent in the debate.

Alisha had never been more dumbfounded in her life. Wordfreak had sounded so wise and perceptive online, not at all like a twenty-five year old...boy. Her imagination had also failed her because she definitely hadn’t imagined him as dropdead gorgeous. He was as tall as her brother—taller. Over six feet, she’d bet. The striped shirt and dark pants were incredibly flattering to his broad, masculine physique, and rather grown up. And everytime she looked at his face...

Alisha shivered involuntarily. Goodness! What was wrong with her? It couldn’t be because of him. It was a reaction to the influenza, surely. Her usual composure had been thrown for a toss in her weakened state. Yes, that was it.

She took a bite of the buttered bread and washed it down with hot, creamy soup as steam rose in fragrant invitation from the bowl. The food steadied her a little, warming the frozen wasteland of her brain.

She could not get over what was happening. Her head could not wrap itself around two blazing facts: Wordfreak was movie-star handsome, and he was only twenty-five years old. So not what she’d imagined. Okay now, everyone knew that her stupid fantasies about SRK were just that—stupid fantasies. In truth, she had expected Wordfreak to be a smart, glib man of average looks; a nerd whose attractiveness would be his quick brain and conversational skills. What she’d got was all of that in a package that was better suited for an action movie.

Alisha ate more soup. It seemed like the safest option.

Diya would probably laugh at her, reproach her for looking a gift horse in the mouth. Alisha supposed it was true. Who would not appreciate the fabulous turn of events? Here she was, sitting in front of the man she had clicked with so brilliantly on the World Wide Web, on a first date that was going surprisingly well despite certain revelations, and he looked like some

kind of X-rated fantasy come to life. Yet, was she focusing on those stellar points? No. She, Alisha Menon, was focusing on the one drawback in this karmic extravaganza—his age. Or a lack thereof.

She shot him a glance from beneath her lashes. He was busy eating too. She ran her tongue over her teeth for any wayward basil, found none, and cleared her throat. When he looked up, she smiled.

“How is it?”

“Great, as always,” he answered after swallowing eagerly.

“You’ve been here before.” Of course he had. It was a popular place.

“I come here once a week or get takeout. It’s one of my favorite eateries.”

They had similar taste in restaurants too, it would seem. “Oh, so you live around here?” She slipped the personal question right in like croutons in her soup.

“Close enough,” he answered cryptically, then spoiled it by grinning. Delightful dimples winked inside his cheeks.

Alisha fought to keep her jaw from dropping into her soup. The man had dimples. Like SRK. Like John Abraham. Goodness gracious! Had God not made him beautiful enough—chiselled cheekbones, a defined jawline, a mop of jet black hair—that he’d been granted sexy little dimples too?

“Why do you have a British accent?” That’s the way, *kutty*. Impress him with dumb questions.

He’d demolished his soup, so he pushed the bowl aside and picked up his wine glass. “I lived in London until I was thirteen, and went back there for university.”

His laser-sharp eyes bored into hers and Alisha suppressed a shiver. “What did you study?”

“Civil engineering and architecture.” Even his fingers were beautiful, wrapped around the wine glass as he swirled it around and around hypnotically.

“How fascinating,” she murmured, feeling rather hypnotized. “What made you... what? Why are you shaking your head?”

“My turn to ask questions,” he said, taking a long swallow of his wine.

That was only fair. Alisha ceded the floor to him.

“I know you work long hours.” He squinted at her as if trying to guess her vocation.

“I’m a lawyer. A divorce lawyer,” she clarified before he asked what kind, and started laughing at his bemused expression. His presumptions about her clearly hadn’t taken him towards divorce law.

“Do you like what you do? I mean...Jesus. Can I even ask that?” He looked uncomfortable, so Alisha took pity on him.

“It’s not about liking or not liking what I do. I’m good at it.” Being a successful divorce lawyer wasn’t something to brag about even if she was proud of her accomplishments. Five divorce cases on average every month for five years, that’s how good she was. “I specialize in out-of-court mediation. I don’t believe long drawn out, finger pointing battles in family court serve any purpose.”

Most couples seeking a divorce agreed that settling their grievances across a conference room table was easier and healthier for all concerned parties, especially if children were involved. But every once in awhile, a case came along that became needlessly complicated because of an idiot’s ego. The Kumar case was such a travesty, and Mr. Kumar was a boorish, stubborn ass.

“I draw up wills and contracts too, some estates and trusts. But it’s mostly divorce.”

“Why divorce law?” Wordfreak had aimed straight for the bull’s eye and hit the mark. Bravo.

Alisha pushed her own empty soup bowl away and sat back in her chair. She’d agreed to meet him. She liked him. She wanted—needed him to know her boundaries before they went any further.

“My parents separated when I was eleven. It left an impression. My father got everything, including custody of two small children who needed their mother and whom my father could not possibly care for because that’s not what fathers do. It’s not their job.”

Bile flooded her mouth at the bitter memories. Her father had pulled strings to get the divorce to work in his favor and to punish his wife, to make her life unbearable because she’d dared to leave him.

“He died before the divorce became final. He was an alcoholic. That’s why my mother left him. My mother had a wonderful advocate. She inspired me towards law.” Alisha wondered why she was telling Wordfreak about her parents before she’d even told him her name.

“I don’t suppose you believe in happily-ever-afters, do you, love?” he asked softly.

She turned cold at his astuteness. He'd gotten to the crux of her fear in one conversation. How did he do it? How could a virtual stranger understand her so well?

Alisha wanted to say something flippant and snarky but Wordfreak deserved to hear the truth.

“I suppose not.”

During the brief exchange, Aryan saw Worddiva rebuild a fortress around herself, brick by brick, adding a steel panic room around her heart for good measure. She'd never be vulnerable again, she was telling him. No wonder she'd felt familiar to him even across the darkness of the Web. They were exactly the same.

Aryan wanted to gather her up in his arms. He wanted be her hero and slay her demons—not that she'd allow him. He wanted her father to resurrect so he could punch the crap out of the asshole.

Another thing they had in common—buggering bastards for fathers.

“I lost my mum when I was thirteen,” he confessed without preamble. He didn't want her to suffer alone, but when Baban arrived with their meals, Aryan was relieved for the reprieve.

“I'm sorry,” she said softly while Baban prepared the table, refilled their glasses.

Aryan dipped his head in acknowledgement, wondering if he could stop there. If it was enough. But it wasn't, was it?

“She found out that my father was having an affair, then she...” Fuck. Even this much was hard to get out without choking after all these years. His fortress wasn't nearly as formidable as he'd thought. Maybe he needed a panic room too. He squeezed the butt of his fork hard enough that his knuckles turned white. “After her death, I was shipped off to Mumbai to live with my grandmother.”

Aryan dropped the fork he was strangling with a jerk when Worddiva's hand covered his knuckles. Reluctantly, he looked at her. The empathy shining on her face as she reached across the table to comfort him made the tightness in his chest ease a bit. He turned his hand over, lacing their fingers together. He'd dreamed of touching her, holding her, and he couldn't believe it was happening. Her hand was soft, her grip strong. A solid foundation despite the leak in the roof.

He forced himself to shake off the morbid and bring some sunshine into their conversation. It was a date, for God's sake, not a grief counseling session. He rubbed a thumb over her knuckle suggestively. She narrowed her eyes. He winked with just a hint of a leer. She gave a droll look, and tried to pull her hand away. He wouldn't let her go, lawsuit be damned.

"Let go," she ordered, struggling to free her right hand from his grip.

"I feel so sad." He made a sad face. "I need sympathy and coddling."

"I'll give you coddling. Let go!"

"Don't be mean." He held on.

"Our dinner is getting cold. We should eat." She changed tack, cajoled like a lawyer.

"Eat with your other hand. It's only a sandwich," he suggested, digging into his casserole. Did she think he'd fold so easily? "*Hmm*. Spicy and crusty and so good." He smacked his lips.

"Quit being cute, Wordfrrrr..." she shut her mouth, startled by what she'd been about to call him.

"Ready to exchange names, yet?" he cooed.

Her blush raced across her cheeks and neck, and still the stubborn woman wouldn't give in.

"Don't be a child. Let me go." She dug her nails into his skin. Not hard, but he let go.

Mission accomplished. Ms. Sunshine with the sharp tongue was back, albeit a tad frazzled.

The rest of the dinner passed by in quick-witted banter and some suggestive talk—mostly on his part. Boys would be boys, after all. But he knew how to toe the line. The highlight of the evening was the look on her face—awestruck and impressed—when John Abraham stopped by their table to say hello. Her eyes nearly popped out of their sockets when she realized that, not only did he know John well—they'd shaken hands and given each other manly backslaps over recent individual accomplishments—but he was also building a weekend house for the movie star in Alibaug. And then, John called him by his bloody given name and bloody outed him.

Worddiva refused to reveal hers even then.