

## **SURPRISE BIRTHDAY PARTY**

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A dog barking at the top of its voice shook Ram up from his dream. Man, it happened again, Ram thought. Maybe I should not work this late this often. Whenever he has a boring commute, he forgets parts of it. He had found on the internet that this phenomenon was pretty common, though. Upon looking around, he found a stray dog few feet away from him running listlessly and barking frantically.

It seemed frightened of something, Ram thought and proceeded onto the well-lit road. He glanced at his watch. It was 10 minutes to 12. If he hurried, he can actually make it, at least seconds before midnight.

He felt happier about every step he took closer to his house. Bharat and Shyam kept showing signs of a surprise party throughout the week. Especially Shyam. He acts as if he has forgotten, but knowing someone for 10 years will help you see through your counterpart like Dr. House sees through Dr. Wilson. Bharat didn't try to hide the fact. After all, they had been doing this for 10 years straight, without missing.

Silver jubilee huh?, thought Ram and chuckled a little. His thought train was disturbed when he noticed that the street lights much farther from him were bright and NOT flickering. His neighbourhood had the worst maintenance, in at least the electricity department. He always felt that the number of powercuts were more than the number of false promises that politician made. Even if the power manages to percolate into this lower strata of a neighbourhood, it would more often than not flicker till it gives a headache to everyone who can see. He came across the banner that the politician had made of himself and hung. Ram used to throw mud at it, literally sometimes. Looking closer, he realised that it was not that man's picture. He thought that a little competition to that son of a bitch would do everyone good, except the competitor, maybe. He had crossed at least half a dozen streetlights by then. Thirty seconds ago, the street lights here were bright and shiny. Now, they are flickering.

He turned around and saw that all the street lights behind him are fine now. As he strained his eyes to look for someone ..... or something that might be following him, that frightened dog gave a long howl of the dead and collapsed on the road. Ram sensed a chill race down his spine as he stood staring at the flickering light, now almost hypnotised.

His watch beeped at five minutes to twelve as he had set it to do so. Ram glanced at his watch and immediately, hastened his pace, entering his apartment. As soon as he entered, the lights in the apartment go off. The powercut again.

This is really not helping thought a very frightened Ram and quickly looked for his phone to use it as a flashlight. As soon as he found the phone, he realised that he had made the silliest of mistakes while charging his mobile. He forgot to turn on the charger. It was scary. Darkness was scary.

He wasn't afraid of ghosts. Getting hurt was scary. There could be poisonous insects or reptiles around, whose bites can be very painful. Having thought so, Ram carefully tried to make his way to the end of the corridor.

He could see the soft yellow glow of candles coming out of the familiar door at the end of the corridor. Well, you could not have asked for a more pleasing setup, thought Ram, still feeling scared to go towards the only source of light along the dark path in front of him. As he approached the door, he saw the calendar in front of it. It was The Kingfisher calendar. As he took it in his hand and started "admiring" each page, one after the other, he remembered the first time he got his hands onto one of these. Bharat gifted such a calendar to him on his 16th birthday for the first time. For some reason, Ram had thought that it would be cool to keep this calendar out by the door. He felt that it was necessary to mark the territory of the bachelors. As he stood there for the minute to pass and enter at exactly 12:00 midnight, he started thinking about the prospective gifts each person would have brought for him. He could see at least 30 pairs of slippers. So he felt he would get around 32 gifts that day. (Ram, Bharat and Shyam leave their boots in the closet).

Just as he was about to enter, he overheard something and stopped immediately. The voice was trembling as it spoke. It sounded very familiar. The voice was speaking, ".... did a lot to this neighbourhood. That fateful day, exactly a year ago, that drunk bastard of a politician rammed his car into .....", he sobbed, and didn't complete the sentence. "I hope he rots in that jail to death.", his voice grew louder and furious.

Ram realised that the voice belonged to Bharat. It was continuously sobbing now. Ram, now very confused, stormed into the house, tears rolling down his cheeks because he didn't know what was bothering his friend.

Suddenly he realised something and turned the calendar back to the first page. It said March 2021.....  
People don't make 2021 calendars in the March of 2020.

Bharat stood up to give a final word, to a group of around 30 people. Shyam was next to him, weeping inconsolably. Bharat said, "May the soul of the best man I've ever known, best friend I've ever had, best friend WE've ever had,....", his speech was interrupted by the clock chiming at 12:00am. Bharat giving a weak smile, his eyes laden with tears, said, "Ah..., and also the soul of the birthday boy, RAM, rest in peace", and broke down uncontrollably into a river of tears as he knelt heavily on the floor.

Ram fainted as soon as he heard that and woke up to a dog barking a moment later. He glanced at his watch. He had around 10 minutes to make it to his "surprise" birthday party. A pamphlet on the road read, "Hurry! Don't miss the "March forward" offer! Buy groceries worth 20k in March, get free toiletries for the next 6 months (April to September, 2022)!"