

KAL AAJ AUR KAL

(S. Jaikumar)

Hi Guys,

I am Bittoo. I am doing my III year Computer Engineering in R.J. Engineering College, Bangalore. Though not with a silver spoon, I was born with an ever-silver (stainless steel) spoon. My father worked in Southern Railways and recently got retired and my mother is a house wife. Papa started his career (!) as a stupid "*kalasi*" (coal loader in steam engines). I just hated his job because of two reasons. One is that, every evening after work he used to come back home with full of stinking coal coated on his body and one day when he took me into the steam engine I burnt my forearm. From that day, I am very scared of fire. The only thing I liked in his profession was that, being a Railway employee, he could get his "free pass" to travel all over India. But only in some stupid second class. That too, most of the times he won't even plan it before that we invariably land up without a proper reservation. But in those times, he used to go to the station well before and get into the unreserved compartments and do "towel reservations" for us. For his stupidity of not planning before, most of the times, he used to stand the whole night in the crowded compartment. Though he gave us some comfort in living, it was always inadequate. When my next door fellas used to go for movies in the first class or balcony we were always scratching the broken chairs in the third class. When my pals were driving bikes we were cursed with stupid bicycles. Even this is ok. Worst of all was, when it came to my future, he did a blunder, which I can never forget or forgive.

Hey Pals,

I am Deepak. I am the President of Infocom World Solutions Inc. We are a multi-national software giant and have operations across the globe. Draped in Reid & Taylor, my favorite accessories are Armani & Gucci. On any given day, I prefer "*pasta*" with "*Remy Martin*". I wear an Omega Constellation on weekdays and Tag Hueuer on weekends. I talk business at golf courses and play billiards at office. I drive a BMW and planning for a Lamborghini next year. I have nearly completed the Atlas in traveling. I am married to Lalitha for seven years and I have a pretty son. He is very cute and brilliant and studying at the Rishi Valleys. I have dined with Hollywood superstars Gregory Peck and Bruce Willis at Café #10. Usually, my day starts at 5AM and I have a regulated routine. I have an ultra modern fitness studio at home and my trainer comes around 630AM. After a continental breakfast, I reach office around 930AM. Once I enter my cabin, I am thoroughly lost in the e-jungle. Most of the evenings there will be commitments for socializing. I am a member in most of the prestigious clubs in the city!

Dear Friends,

My name is Narayanan. I am aged 71 and living in this Kalyan old age home for the past nine years. I worked and retired as an Accounts Manager in AG's office. I was married to Shantha and we did not have any children. I came here after my wife died. I pay the monthly charges for this old age home from my pension and I also have a small bank balance, which I have told Mr. Balram the custodian of this home to use it for my funeral and cremation expenses.

This home has 37 rooms and each of them is to be shared by two. Guptaji is my roommate since I came here. He is around 78 and is staying here for more than sixteen years. Staying next to next over years we have become very thick friends. He is always very calm and does not talk much. But with me, he used to share all his life experiences. He had almost confessed everything to me.

Bittoo again. Though I scored very well in my exams, for some reasons, I could not get the necessary aggregate to get the Engineering seat on the merit quota and I had to apply for only for the management quota. P.T Engineering College is the best in town and naturally it would cost you more! This stupid man (my Papa) could not understand this funda and refused to pay the capitation fees stating that it is too high and he can't afford it! Today 15 lakhs is not huge money and he never understood that, by refusing he is spoiling the future of his son! From my place, he sent me 500kms away to Bangalore and got admitted in this stupid College. It is not that it is free admission here. Here also, that foolish man paid a capitation fee of 8 lakhs. After putting me into this college, now he is cribbing to give me a bare minimum allowance to run my routine. He is not giving me even 10k per month. He is such a miserable miser that he does not know the cost of living at Bangalore. You know, an evening day out in a pub costs you more than 800 bucks. A decent dress costs you around 2k. He knows nothing about a metro but only knows to crib! Whenever I ask him he will say that he is trying to give us the best he could give! Best! Bull with it! If he can't give the basic needs, why the hell he should get kids at all? I am jus getting bugged and waiting to jus get free from this rut!

Deepak again. Few years back, my mother died of cancer. I admitted her at the Adyar Cancer Institute and she underwent that stupid chemotherapy. Arey! You should see her at that time! Horrible! All her hair had fallen and she was just looking like an alien from some Mars or Jupiter! One day I took my family to see her. On seeing her, my son got so terrified that he ran very high temperature that night! My wife swore that she would never come back to see that horror! To much of our relief, one fine day she died after battling for nearly two years. From then on, my father had become literally crazy! I tried having him with us for some time but I should confess that, it was the most terrifying period in my life! He just gave all of us a nightmare and literally made our life miserable! He also had a wheezing problem and every night he used to snore so heavily that my wife threatened to walk out to her parent's place, if this man is not sent out of the house immediately. He was also an embarrassment when our distinguished friends come to our house for some parties. So I sent him back to our native place where we had a small house. I also send him Rs.1250 per month for all his expenses. Though my wife feels it is too much, I had always been benevolent. Trust me, it is a definitely a bounty for him! After all, what is there for that old man to spend more than that! But with all these comforts, this old man is continuously bugging me around! He wants me to come with my family to the native at least once in a year! Today also he has sent me a long letter to come and spend a week with him. Tell me boss, having such a tight routine under my belt, is this really possible? Going all the way to that stupid place and stay for a week in that godforsaken place!! That too, with my wife who hates the very thought of it!!! I am really bugged with this old lousy folk!!! I am just praying that, soon, he rests in peace and leave all of us in peace!

Narayanan again. Guptaji used to be very very proud of his father. To him, his father was a symbol of profound affection and absolute dedication. His father loved him so much and had brought him up like a prince. He used to fondly remember that, his father used to take bath with a detergent soap for himself but used to get the best luxury soap for Guptaji. I have seen tears rolling down his cheeks, when Guptaji recollects those nights when there was a power failure, his father used to stay awake the whole night and wave a book to get rid of biting mosquitoes. One day after confessing to me that his father bargained one of his kidneys to get the required money to send him to college, I was also so moved that, we both could not eat for the next two days.

You know something. Once, this Guptaji had been a millionaire. He had lived a royal life. In his prime days, he had enjoyed life to the fullest. But his later years are really tragic. Earlier, whenever I used to ask him, "It is ok that I am here because I have no one. But why you are here?" he always evaded my question with an elegant smile and drawing his finger along his forehead to depict *fate*. But as years rolled and as we became close, he shared everything to me.

Lady luck had always been with Guptaji in his youth. Though an average student he was able to get into a professional course only owing to his father's sacrifice. After his early jobs in some good-for-nothing companies, he got his first but best break of his career and got recruited in a multi national company. He was very handsome that the daughter of the MD of that company fell in mad love with him and they got married and thus he inherited a fortune. He had a son and a daughter. The kids had the best of the education and ultimate luxury

lifestyle. He gave them such a regal lifestyle that none of us could ever dream of. Both of them grew like a prince and a princess. His son became a neuro surgeon and his daughter became an architect. Son married another doctor and daughter got married to a software engineer and both of them settled happily in the US.

After years of royal life, the wheel of fortune started slowly to spin on the reverse. Guptaji's wife died in a road accident. His company incurred substantial losses and one fine day, the company had to close down its shutters. Guptaji lost all his money and literally pushed onto the streets. He wrote to his children about the situation. Even before he wrote, his son-in-law knew the situation and had gradually kept himself and his family away from Guptaji. In the case of his son-in-law it is understandable. After all, blood is thicker than water. But the worst surprise came from his son. Guptaji thought that his son would come and take him to US. His son came to India. Not to take Guptaji to US but only to sell the house and take the remnants to US. Expressing various practical difficulties, his son suggested (pressurised) Guptaji to join this old age home. While admitting Guptaji, he assured that he would send money regularly for the expenses but often defaulted. He would almost forget to send even the monthly rent for few months and only after a spate of reminders he will send some money and that too, always on deficit. Guptaji used to feel so shy and ashamed and that made him not to come out of the room at all. Of course, ageing is inevitable and ailments are its definite accomplice. Guptaji developed serious medical problems that he needed constant medical care and attention. Many a days, this poor father of the greatest neuro surgeon used to suffer and cry of pains and curse himself in despair.

Today morning I got up shocked by the screaming of Guptaji. In sheer pain, he was sitting at the corner of the bed holding his chest and he was sweating so much. I was so terrified that I immediately ran to Balram and asked to arrange for some immediate medical assistance. As I felt something odd, I also went to the nearby telephone booth and tried to contact both his son and daughter on ISD. First I tried for her daughter as I had her mobile number. His daughter came on line and I told her the situation. She said that they are presently in South Africa on a tour and that they can't come now immediately. She asked me to contact her brother and do the needful and went off the line abruptly. I desperately tried for his son and after several rings, he came on line. When I conveyed the matter, he was very cool and said nothing would happen. He also said that it could be a drama by the old man to get more money from him. When I said that his condition is really precarious, he said that he is in a very important seminar and in any circumstance he cannot think of coming to India, in the near future. Finally he said that in case of any undue happening, he asked me to take care and assured that he would reimburse the expenses.

I came running to the home only to see a small crowd in front of our room. My body started shivering and when I came inside, my beloved friend, Mr. Deepak Gupta, fondly known as Bittoo, was lying dead with flies swarming around his open mouth. The computer engineer, who was the President of a multi-national company, was lying alone and all alone. I drew money from my account and gave it to Balram to do the needful. While watching my dear friend, who once traveled in the Mercedes, departing in the obituary van, I could only request that his body need not be cremated but be buried. After all, my dear friend was always afraid of fire.