I saw you for the first time when I was coming home from campus with my roommate Naru. Sitting in a chair on the balcony, you were tuning your guitar, your mouth humming some melody which I failed to recognize. After that day I saw you everywhere. I found you shooting free throws in the Cinnamon Tree Apartments court, dribbling a soccer ball in the field behind McDonald’s, playing guitar and singing with notes scattered everywhere, arguing with other Nepalese friends about why a Mac is much better than a PC. In every get-together I went to, I saw you. If I happened to drop in at someone’s apartment on a weekend, I would hear your voice even before I reached the door. You laughed every time you finished a sentence; most of the times you would be the only one laughing. You seemed to have convinced yourself to believe that something witty—at least humorous—flew out of your mouth every time you opened it. At least, it seemed so to me. Gradually people grew bored with your tedious conversations and avoided you whenever they
could. I did not blame them; you had made yourself too available, too cheap. After all, people can take only so much of anything, of anyone.

The only thing I liked about you was that you invited me to play soccer, my favorite sport. You either called me on the phone or came knocking at my door. But later I found out you came because you almost always lacked people. Sometimes I said I was busy or I had tests coming up, but usually I slipped my feet into long red socks that reached my knees and then into Nike soccer shoes, and went with you.

On the soccer field you always tried tricks, and you always failed at them. Every time the ball generously fell at your feet, you shouted, “Guys! This is how Ronaldo dribbles a ball.” But you never went past a defender. We all laughed, almost forgetting that a game was in play. But you never seemed to mind. You seemed immune to criticism. I could not tell if this came out of your innocence or your experience. But I never saw you angry at anyone.

You called everyone mitra, a word in Nepali meaning “friend,” instead of using their names. One day I called you “Shrestha mitra.” Those who were near enough to hear me say it laughed. You did not seem to be very fond of that name—no Nepalese likes to be called by his last name—but somehow the name stuck. Maybe it stuck because you did not like it. Soon everyone, except Americans and international students from countries other than
Nepal, started calling you “Shrestha mitra.” When you finally asked me to stop calling you by that name, I laughed “Sure, Shrestha mitra.” With your height stretching to six feet and your body weighing 170 pounds, you could have easily hushed me. But you never did. A few weeks later you said to me again, “Please call me Sushant,” which was your real name. But by that time the name “Shrestha mitra” had become so popular that there was nothing I could do about it even if I had wanted to.

I went to the next-door apartment, and you were there. I knew it. In a way I had begun to expect you everywhere I went. My ears got tuned to your voice, my eyes ready for your sight. I got used to it. I got used to you.

“Is there anything to eat?” you said. “I am starving.”

We continued our conversations as if you had spoken a language none of us understood.

“There is cereal,” Dev said, not taking his eyes off the laptop where he was searching for “Aage Bhi Jaane Na Tu.” You happily made your way toward the fridge. But when you were about to open the door of the fridge, Alok said, “But there is no milk.” The room burst with laughter. You laughed one of those laughs people use to conceal their humiliation. I felt a little uneasy finding you struggle to steady yourself against the drowning laughter.

“There’s some milk in my apartment,” I said. You looked right through me and did not say a word.

The following Saturday you popped into our apartment
when I was playing guitar and my roommates were singing "Yo Jindagani." After the song was over Naru said a joke—a dirty one, naming one of the characters as you, Shrestha mitra. The joke ended making fun of that character. We could not help laughing. You left as quickly as you had come, disappearing behind the half-open blinds. But we continued laughing, holding our stomachs with our hands, long after you were gone.

Then you began to be seen less and less. At parties, I did not see you. I did not hear your loud voice at the soccer field. But for some reason, I never asked anyone why you were not there. I could have easily made a phone call, but I did not do that either. It occurred to me that people had almost forgotten that there lived someone by the name of Sushant, that you even existed. February came, but you never showed up at my door.

On a chilly Tuesday morning I saw your roommate John at the bus stop.

"Have you seen Sushant lately?" I asked him.

"Yes," he said. "He has been sick."

"What happened?" I asked out of curiosity.

"He is not sure yet." He made it short.

You had been sick for a month now. I wanted to watch a crucial soccer match between Chelsea—my favorite club—and Liverpool. I remembered you telling me that you had watched the entire match between Manchester United and Liverpool live on your laptop. I decided to call you.
“How have you been?” I asked casually.

“Just the same.” You spoke in a barely audible voice. I pressed the cell phone closer to my ear.

“What did the doctors say?”

You said something I was not hoping for. “I don’t think you want to know it.”

“Why?” I could not contain my curiosity.

“Because it is rectal cancer.” You caught me off guard.

There was nothing unusual in the way you said it. In fact, your voice was tranquil as a midnight sky. But those words deafened my ears; I did not hear anything you said after that, anything I said after that. Next thing I remember was hanging up the phone. You were right: I did not want to know it. On certain days I would have laughed when you said something like that, dismissing it as a joke. But that day I did not. I could not. There was something in your voice that made me believe you. I thought I heard the ache in your voice beneath your tranquility. I had always believed that you would be one of the last people to catch a cold or a flu. So much for your enviable muscles and intimidating height. I forgot why I had called you. Later that night I learned from Naru that Chelsea had lost 0–2.

When I learned that you had suffered from rectal cancer, for a moment I thought your nickname was the cause of it. I knew very well it was not, but I could not help thinking it. It reminded me of the childhood stories with false causalities that my mother used to tell me: Rahula became sick because he did not listen to his mother, or it
rained because the Princess cried. For the first time I hated false causalities and childhood stories and my mother for telling them to me.

Of course I was worried because you were diagnosed with rectal cancer, but I was more worried that something might happen to you before I could apologize, leaving me with that burden for the rest of my life. I could not decide whether to wait for you to get cured or to say it to you as soon as it seemed appropriate.

When I went to see you in your room after about a month, I found the door ajar. Standing at the threshold, I studied your room. Posters of Ronaldo and Gerrard hung on either wall. The ceiling light struggled to make its presence felt against the yellow pour of the sun that streamed into the room through the half-open window. Perhaps your roommate had forgotten to turn it off. You were sleeping, your entire body covered with a red blanket. I put a bag of oranges, apples, and bananas on your desk and prepared to leave. But then I heard you turn to the side and saw you lift the comforter a little. Perhaps it was the noise from the bag of fruits that woke you up. You looked at me with those eyes people have when they wake up abruptly in the middle of night and they cannot tell for sure what is in front of them.

“How are you?” I asked.

“Oh, the same.” Your voice sounded as if it were coming from a distant desert, all its energy soaked by tiny
sand particles on its way. You had lost your weight. I had planned to talk to you for much longer and then apologize to you, but I ran out of things to say.

“Well, get well soon,” I whispered and made my way toward the door.

“Take care!” I heard you say with a lot of struggle. For a moment I wondered if you were being sarcastic because I was the one supposed to be telling that to you. But then I dismissed the thought. Your roommates, Eric and John, were playing X-box in the living room. I threw a brief smile at them but did not say anything. I just wanted to get out.

The following day I had just come from campus when I saw something familiar on the dining table: the bag of fruits I had taken to you. I thought I heard the beating of my heart. This is enough. I said it out loud. Not that there was someone nearby. I called you, but you didn’t answer. After about an hour I called you again, and again you didn’t answer. Before going to bed I sent you a text. You didn’t reply to that either. When I called you the next day, it went straight to your voicemail. I became angry with you. With myself. It was just a small joke, after all. How could you be so mad at me for a joke that was meant for anything but to hurt you? How was I supposed to know the name I called you once—once, for God’s sake—would stick forever? And why did I care so much that you were angry with me? You never were my best friend. And there was no shortage of friends in my life, really.
When Naru came home from his classes, I told him that you were diagnosed with rectal cancer.

“Looks like he made a fool out of you,” he said. “It must have been an exaggeration.”

“But he was the one who told me,” I protested.

“Exactly. He is more likely to exaggerate than anyone else,” he replied, with even more confidence. “Do you remember when he fooled us with the car accident that never took place?”

“Yes, I remember,” I said, without remembering.

“It must be just a minor infection,” he said with such certainty, as if he were the doctor who diagnosed you. I did not wish to continue. After all, what was the point of convincing him that you were dealing with this adversity? It was very unlikely that he would go to see you and try to comfort you.

“Yes, it must be just a minor infection,” I mumbled and left the room, slamming the door behind me.

During Easter weekend we gathered for a dumpling party.

“Does anyone know how Sushant is lately?” I asked, without looking at anyone in particular. I blurted it out, not sure why I asked.

“Oh, you mean Shrestha mitra—” Dev started.

“Sushant!” I found myself shouting. Everyone stopped what they were doing—eating dumplings, dipping dumplings in the tomato sauce, surfing the internet, laughing, wrapping dumplings—as if I had uttered “statue” in the childhood game. “Yo Jindagani” kept playing softly,
smoothly in the background.

"Please call him Sushant," I said quietly. But still everyone was staring at me, refusing to go back to what they were doing, as if they demanded some explanation for perturbing them. As if something were wrong with me.

"Ex-Excuse me," I stammered, and made my way toward the door, leaving the half-empty plate with steaming dumplings.

In early April you dropped all your classes and went to live with your parents, who had come to visit you before you were diagnosed with rectal cancer, in an apartment not very far from where you had been living. I tried to imagine the looks on your parents’ faces when they discovered that you, whom they were seeing after three years, had rectal cancer. You would be treated with radiation and chemotherapy. When I asked if it was going to be too expensive for you, you said, “My health insurance will cover ninety percent of the cost. The remaining ten percent should be covered somehow.”

After about a month I went to see you again. Pravu drove his peeling green car. I sat next to him. In the backseat Alok and Dev chatted about how easily a single comment made by Akash to Sid in Dil Chahta Hai breaks their seemingly unbreakable friendship. I watched from the window—McDonald’s, the soccer field, the empty walkway, Provo High buses parked side by side. Suddenly I heard the tires skid. I jerked forward. When we were
about to cross the road, the traffic light had turned red.
Alok and Dev were still preoccupied with their conversa-
tion about the movie. Now they had taken sides: Alok de-
fended Akash, saying that Akash was only joking, while
Dev believed Sid did the right thing by slapping Akash
because Akash had crossed the line of friendship. In the
thick of their conversation, the light turned green.

You lived about eight blocks from my place. I had
heard a lot of things about you: you had lost more than
half of your weight, your chance of survival grew slimmer
each day, you might go back to Nepal any day. I dismissed
most of them as rumors, even though I knew very well
that there was a good chance of those rumors becoming
true. When we parked the car and got out, we found your
apartment complex rather quiet. No people were around.
The sun painted one of the mountains red before vanish-
ing behind it. Your apartment stood on the third floor.

Your father opened the door, and beside him stood
your mother, both wearing gigantic smiles. I was sur-
prised to find both your father and mother much shorter
and thinner than me. I had imagined them—at least your
father—to be tall and robust like you. The only thing that
was common between you and your father was the smile:
he smiled exactly like you.

When I saw you, I felt goose bumps and staggered, forc-
ing myself to catch the wall. I would have mistaken you
for one of the mummies that scientists excavate from the
pyramids had it not been for your smile. I felt my throat
dry up even though I had drunk water in the car. When I finally managed to greet you, only “Sus” came out of my mouth, the rest vanishing into a gasp. It sounded more like a shock than a greeting.

“Want some water, Babu?” Your mother came to my rescue. “It’s hot outside, isn’t it?” I nodded and drank a glass of tap water empty in one gulp.

You sat on an armchair, your legs stretching onto another chair. You covered yourself with your old red blanket, which had lost some of its thickness and brightness. Indeed you had lost weight. You had grown skinny like the second hand of the clock that punctuated the lengthy silences between our conversations. It seemed as if someone had inserted his hand inside your body and pulled out all your muscles, leaving you with only rickety bones wrapped by thinnest skin. I feared that your skin might not hold very long. If I looked hard enough, I was sure I could count the veins in your neck. Your eyes remained half-closed, or half-open, just enough for the light to enter them, your face yellow and uncertain. All the time you were talking, I felt you were looking not at me, not at any one of us, but at some distant creatures that were visible only to you. Every time you turned to the side, I shuddered that your neck might break at any moment with a snap. Just like that. Words struggled in your tongue like a rainbow trout on a hook.

Yet, you smiled every now and then. Lightly, faintly, gingerly.
Your mother cooked us rice, chicken curry, lentil soup, and tomato pickle. But for some reason I could not squeeze more than three forkfuls of rice and curry down my throat. Not that your mother was a bad cook—I just did not feel hungry that day.

"Is it not tasty, Babu?" your mother asked me, seeing my plate full while everyone else had almost emptied theirs.

"No, no." I tried to sound genuinely excited. "It is very tasty, Ama." I forced a few more forkfuls, but then when she went to the bedroom and your father busied himself talking with other friends, I quickly reached for the trash can under the sink and dumped more than half of the food. When I looked over my shoulder to see if anyone had seen me, I saw you staring at me. But you did not say anything. We both knew better than to say something. I picked at the rest.

Only as we prepared to leave did I realize that I had completely forgotten my purpose in coming to see you. When we all reached the parking lot, I said, "I think I dropped my wallet. I will be right back." All the way up the stairs I thought of what exactly I was going to say. This is it, I said to myself. Finally it was the moment I had rehearsed in my mind so many times. But when I opened the door, I saw you asleep. I did not dare wake you up.

Back in my apartment, I found Naru burying his head in a bulky chemistry book.

"Is he going to be cured?" he asked me, continuing to fix his eyes on the book. How could I ask a question like
that to you or your parents when you were battling death? One just cannot gather the courage to ask, “Are you going to be OK?” in a situation like that.

“I don’t know,” I said at length, without meeting his eyes. Through the window smudged with dust, I watched the dim traffic light change from green to yellow to red and then back to green.

In August, NEPSA, BYU’s Nepalese Student Association, collected funds—cash or check—and food from its members and from other people, contributed a couple hundred bucks from its own account, and lit nine small candles in your apartment, wishing for your quick recovery. They also brought emerald poster board for a Get Well note to go with the donation. When the note arrived at my place, it was more than half filled. I could not decide what to write. I read a few of the notes: We are all praying for you. You are a fighter. Get well soon! After about ten minutes, I scribbled: Sushant! As the rain slaps the window at an angle, I revisit the days you came to visit me.

I could not tell why I wrote exactly what I wrote out of all the things I had in my mind, out of all the things I could have written. I never knew what you thought about it. It was possible that you went through only the messages and did not bother to see who wrote what. But I felt an inexplicable lightness at the thought that finally I gave your name back to you—the name that I had
snatched away from you right in front of your eyes, right in front of everyone. As I passed the chart paper to my left, my heart flickered with the relief that I could fulfill at least one of your requests.