

Article: The Ice-Cold Evening of the Cake Gobblers

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But the sovereign emperor of Christmas is, undoubtedly, the authentic Christmas Cake. It was the year 2004, when a special treat on Sunday meant an ice-cream of your choice, cotton candy, or, at the most, (if your parents are vulnerable enough to give in to your demands disguised craftily in the form of syrupy-sweet pleas!) *pani-puri* or a pizza. But, now, the 'basic' level of a treat starts from Mc. Donald's advances to Pizza Hut, and rockets up to K.F.C., Baskin-Robbins, and whatnot!

Returning to where I began, it was the year 2004, and the Christmas season had arrived. Myself, Pooja, Sonisha, and our 5-year-old friend Lekha were an inseparable gang- we were like the assorted ingredients of *bhel puri*, each different in 'flavour', but a saucy extravaganza when combined. We were discussing a rather serious matter.

"Amma told, ya..." started Lekha, (who had an unfailing tendency to prefix or suffix the word 'ya' to every sentence!)

"What, yaaa?" three voices, evident with sarcasm, rang out.

"Amma told, Rosy Aunty, who has just moved into the house opposite ours, said that for Christmas, she's going to bake a big chocolate truffle cake at her home only ya!" Three pairs of eyes lit up with renewed interest. "So, I'm going to ask her for some cake...I love chocolate truffle cake, ya! But I feel shy. You all also come with me?"

We assembled at Lekha's house to dress her up as Santa, complete with a red outfit, red cap, a 'cottony' beard, a stinky sack filled with chocolates, and balloons, all included. Lekha seemed to be the puniest Santa Claus ever alive since she bore not an inch of fat or flab! "Girls, it's time for us to rock and roll! Let's go," said Sonisha.

"We can't barge in without planning every detail, if we can't afford to foil our plan," Pooja said wisely. "Yes, that's right. Now, listen carefully, everyone- this is what we are going to do once we're on the battlefield...I mean at Rosy Aunty's place," I began briskly.

“After we perform, she will offer us some truffle cake. The FIRST time she asks, control your taste buds and firmly say- “No thanks, Aunty” so that we mind our P’s and Q’s as well as maintain our dignity. Then...”

“Aha! I get it! The next time she asks, then...” started Lekha. “Let's say no again,” Pooja reasoned, “Otherwise she’ll think that we instantly accepted her offer.”

“Absolutely correct. Now, the THIRD time she asks, say a half ‘no’ but almost ‘yes’. Remember, the ‘no’ is present, but the ‘yes’ is much stronger and dominant. That will force her to ask us for some cake again, and then...” “Then we say a ‘yes’, feast on the chocolate truffle cake, and celebrate X’mas!” Lekha’s shrill voice echoed with enthusiasm.

“Right-o! So, what are we waiting for? Let's go!” Sonisha said in her American accent.

And with that, the four of us were off to claim victory. We reached our destination and rang the doorbell.

Rosy Aunty’s kind smile and frisky dimples were a warm welcome. “Aunty, we’ve planned a little Christmas show specially for you- shall we...?” “Oh, how sweet! Yes, of course,” said Rosy Aunty, calling her husband and father-in-law to come and watch us too. A little nervous, but the wafting aroma of freshly-baked cake spurred us on. Lekha started before we could even blink:

“A long time ago, in B.T.M., as the Holy Bible says, Mary’s boy child, Jesus Christ, was born on Christmas Day!

Hark now...”

Our audience couldn’t help but burst into laughter. “Lekha, you...ignorant re-writer of history! Lord Jesus was born in BETHLEHEM, not B.T.M.!” the three of us hissed angrily. But Rosy Aunty saved Lekha from our wrath by telling us to go on. The carols were sung, to the tune of which our pocket-size Santa danced (or rather, pranced). Thankfully, we were applauded, and then Rosy Aunty asked us to sit.

The much-anticipated moments had finally presided. “That was really a brilliant show, children. How about having some chocolate truffle cake now?” asked Rosy Aunty.

All of us recalled our plan and, barring the impulsivity of our stomachs’ rumble, chorused, “No thank you, Aunty.” Rosy Aunty assumed that we were hesitant and shy, and for some time, talked to us in a friendly manner. Then she put forth her

offer once again. "It's home-made and fresh, just out of the oven...try a little of it?"
"No, thank you, Aunty," a half-hearted chorus.

"Come on, everyone likes chocolate truffle cake, and this is the Christmas cake, exclusively made. I'll bring it." Remembering the 'half-no almost-yes' policy, we said, "Uh...no, Aunty, thanks," and were about to dominate the 'yes', when unexpectedly, Sonisha said the dreaded words, "No, no...thanks but no thanks, Aunty." We looked at her in disbelief. "Okay," said a puzzled Rosy Aunty.

Crestfallen at this catastrophic crisis, we could do nothing more but trudge back to Lekha's home. Once there, we couldn't control our rage. "Sonisha! You messed up everything!"

"Wait, guys...how about some cake from our good old Royal Bakery?" tried Sonisha.

All three of us put out our tongues in disgust. "That crumbly, mouldy brown stuff..."
"With stale cream..." "And with a measly cherry on top!" There was a silence after which we all departed.

The next day dawned fresh and bright, and early at noon the four of us met. "Rosy Aunty came home this morning and gave us Christmas cake!" all four of us blurted out, each eager to let the others know. Our happiness knew no bounds; there is a saying- "You can't have the cake and eat it too," but we proved it wrong!

Five minutes later, we were all celebrating at Lekha's home. We hadn't yet feasted.

"Wait, I'll bring my piece of cake, then we'll all eat together," said Lekha. We decided to wait; we had waited all these days anyway. But Lekha couldn't find her cake. "I kept it on the table...where did it go?"

"To your hometown, Andhra maybe?" Pooja teased. The mystery was solved in the next minute. Lekha's younger sister, Haarika, stepped out of her room, chocolate smeared around her mouth, hands all chocolatey, a look of intoxication in her eyes, subsequently followed by a satisfied burp.

"Haariii! You..." (then seeing her mother approach, took a deep breath to start a tantrum) "*Ammaaa*, see! See what has happened!" One look at Haarika, and she "saw" what had happened. "Relax, Lekha! The three of us have got plenty of cake here, enough for all of us to share," said Pooja. We laughed and finally sat together to relish our Christmas cake.

A cold gust of wind crept uninvitingly through the window, making us shiver. I knew the December air was freezing. But I also knew, paradoxically, that at that moment, four friends were as snug and cosy as anyone could be, basking in the warmth of friendship, and the realization that true Christmas was all about three things: loving, caring, and sharing.