

MY NIGHT WITH A GHOST

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EXT: NIDHI APARTMENTS, STAIRWAY, PUNE, EARLY EVENING

Shivani, late 20's butch with spiky short hair and toughened, masculine face walks up a dirty grey staircase with stained peach walls. Dressed in an ill-fitting saree, watching Instagram videos on her phone with a vacant expression.

As she scrolls through them, you see they are all from the same account @AmritorNot. Videos after one another pop up on screen with Amrita, a beautiful femme 20 year old in a gorgeous salwar-kameez talking as Shivani, in jeans and a T-shirt dodges the camera.

AMRITA

(on screen)

Hey guys! I'm here at Pune's trendy
new restaurant where East meets
West, where the Parthenon meets
Mount Everest?! What?

Shivani turns into a new flight of stairs. She passes doors with dolls and lemons hanging over them, some have crosses on it. She's holding a crumpled box of chocolates labelled "Amrita". She swipes up.

AMRITA (CONT'D)

Hey guys, kaam ne meri jaan nikal
di so you're getting me at
Vaishali's today--

Shivani continues climbing. She crosses doors with "BEWARE DOGS AND GHOSTS" "VACANT "NO GHOSTHUNTERS ALLOWED TO RENT", "BEWARE OF CLASS C GHOSTS". Etc.

Another video pops up but not on Amrita's account this time but a downloaded clip in her gallery, titled "Help persuade @Shivsmaths to come out... for food at Prasad Uncle's Chaat for Guys, Girls and Ghosts!

Amrita is talking to Shivani, who's just out of the screen.

AMRITA (CONT'D)

Shivani, shut up for a second
stream teen second mein shuru hone
wala hain. Phir se bana tomorrow--
Hey guys! We're headed to what is
sure to be my new favorite chaat
place for a special Valentine's Day
edition--

Shivani leans against her door, her keys hanging from the lock, scrolling through videos and photos of Amrita faster and faster until the most recent one. Amrita is standing at a restaurant called K2P.

A bouquet of red roses with a card "HAPPY VALENTINE'S DAY AMRITA" is lying next to her door. Shivani kicks out at the bouquet, letting the roses spill across the staircase below her.

PRET

Hi, do you have any food?

INT: BUREAU OF SPECTRAL AFFAIRS OFFICE, IN THE PLANE BETWEEN PLANES

Pret, a tall woman-shaped figure made entirely of smoke, shaped like a person dying of hunger stands in front of a shimmering jet-black wall. Despite her having no real features, she somehow looks unhappy and argumentative.

DISMEMBODIED VOICE

Pret Class B 256.7. You have been assigned for a haunting assignment. Please report for feeding.

PRET

Okay so I promise in the name of the gods, this is my last question. If they summon me and I ask for some other offering--can it be human food? Like humans offer food all the time to the gods I just think--

DISEMBODIED VOICE

According to the Laws of Betaal 155 A Appendix B, a Class B pret is past its finite humanity and is destined to serve those who are still alive, without benefit or provocation--

PRET

If I say I'm feeling very provoked, can I stay?

EXT: NIDHI APARTMENTS, OUTSIDE SHIVANI'S APARTMENT, PUNE.

Shivani ignores Pret, muttering.

SHIVANI

Ali bhai might still take me there...300 jayega but she'll be there...

PRET

Excuse me, do you by chance have
any food to spare?

Shivani turns around to see a very tall woman-shaped being with long, lustrous hair and a full, curvy figure. She tries to focus in on the face but it keeps coming out blurry.

SHIVANI

Lady do I look like a kitchen? Cafe
is down the road.

Distended bony fingers reach out to touch her face. Shivani and Pret recoil in surprise as their hand actually makes skin contact.

PRET

You stink of so much need...so much
heartbreak.

Unnerved, Shivani stumbles a little on the stair as Pret comes closer.

PRET (CONT'D)

Oh, I'm sorry that must be very rude,
but you feel so...enticingly hungry.

SHIVANI

Leave me alone!

Shivani starts running down the stairs. Lights on the staircase flickers, bathing Pret and Shivani in black and ochre yellow of the darkness and Pret's smoke body. Pret manages to reach Shivani just as she hits the main door. Shivani nearly screams but Pret puts a smoky gag on her mouth to silence her.

PRET

Let me eat.

Shivani struggles to open the door behind her. Pret backs away and releases the gag from her mouth.

PRET (CONT'D)

No, sorry! Not like--I don't want to
eat you. I want to eat...human food.
Millets and rice and potatoes, do
humans still do potatoes?

Shivani silently agrees, still terrified.

PRET (CONT'D)

Okay look. I'm a Pret. Hungry ghost
wandering the ether around the
material plane until someone wants
something from me.

SHIVANI

I didn't summon you here... did I?

PRET

No but you did attract me. Broken hearts are kind of my specialty, or rather fixing them.

SHIVANI

Like how? Breaking into her house and writing blood-filled love declarations on her walls and filling her apartment with every single one of her favorite dishes from her favorite restaurants until she loves him again?

PRET

That's...oddly specific and frankly useless.

SHIVANI

Mera dimaag satak gaya hain. I'm taking criticism from a ghost...

Shivani laughs hysterically. Pret turns into rolling eyes and with a hand, turns Shivani's face upwards to them.

PRET

Look, human, I'm a literal embodiment of hunger. I can satisfy your hunger...or I can make someone's worse. Do you get it? I can make her yours... Make that woman who torments your dreams want you, need you like a hungry stomach needs food.

SHIVANI is fascinated and a little horrified, in a way that a person would look at a delicious meal offered in hell.

SHIVANI

In return for... potatoes?

PRET

I'm dead. Human food is forbidden to me, but you know, time passes, the mind wanders, curiosity blah blah. So to really eat your potatoes or your rice or humans, you have to have...me, inside you.

SHIVANI

Kab tak?

A long silence follows.

PRET
Entirely up to you.

Shivani glares suspiciously at the suddenly deferential tone for a second but continues thinking silently.

SHIVANI
If I wanted be alone, meri closet
bahut comfortable thi.

PRET
Sacrifices are only meaningful if
someone else honors it, otherwise
what is the point?

SHIVANI
All you can eat for one night, and
only once we can find Amrita.

PRETNA
Your wish is my command, human.

SHIVANI
Shivani...Shiv.

PRET
Shiv. Repeat after me, "in the name
of the dead, let the hungry one
live."

SHIVANI
In the name of the dead, let the
hungry one live.

Pret thrusts herself into Shivani. The door behind her closes with a bang as Shivani and Pret literally merge into one person, her body changing to a leaner, more starved form. Pret wraps herself around Shivani like a lover on her back in the reflection of the metallic door handle.

INT: K2P RESTAURANT, KOREGAON PARK. ONE AND A HALF HOUR LATER.

SUPERIMPOSE TEXT:

TITLE CARD: A DHIDO THALI WITH MOUSSAKA, GYROS, AND A SIDE OF TZATZIKI AND MOMOS. 10.5 HOURS LEFT.

An upscale restaurant, with soothing blue lighting and jazz music from a Spotify playlist crooning as the four customers present fidget on 'traditional' Nepali made chairs crowded around a small round table while picking at the equally aesthetically clashing food.

The bored-looking host startles, as Shivani/Pret bursts in through the door, her face starving and clutching a couple of the roses she kicked down the stairs earlier.

HOST

Table for one...ma'am?

Shivani looks around the restaurant, ignoring the host.

SHIVANI

She isn't here...

Just as Shivani is turning away, a waiter passes them by with a tray full of delicious momos with tzatziki and spicy sauce dips.

PRET

I can taste it on my tongue, feel
it in here...

Shivani is turned around violently, her arms reaching out for the tray like a long-lost lover by Pret, her mouth outstretched to a frankly terrifying maw.

SHIVANI

Hey, hey, what are you doing? We
have to find Amrita...

PRET

You promised to feed me.

Shivani struggles, her body contorting as if struggling to hold an invisible person back as she narrowly dodges the waiter. Pret reflects in the mirror and cutlery on tables across the restaurant floor as she tries to reach for other food on other guests' tables.

SHIVANI

We look like we're having a stroke
goddamnit, can you please chill!

PRET

I've been hungry for centuries.
This is not an "chill" this is
a..."Feed me or I eat you."

SHIVANI

Amrita cannot see this video online
or I swear I'll kill you...end you-
- stop it!

PRET

I am HUNGRY.

Just as Pret/Shivani reach for a table, someone clears their
throat delicately behind them. It's the hostess.

HOSTESS

We can arrange a table for one and
a thali and moussaka within five
minutes, if you'd like.

CUT TO:

Shivani sulks in a corner table, near the kitchen door,
twitching as she glares at Pret moving restlessly across her
shoulders and chest through a metallic spoon.

SHIVANI

Is the attitude part of the
possession?

Pret doesn't respond but creates a horrifying looking
decrepit middle finger in the air that makes three guests
behind them yelp in fear. Shivani sighs wearily.

SHIVANI (CONT'D)

Fine.

Short silence passes as Shivani fidgets, feeling guilty and
unnecessarily childish.

SHIVANI (CONT'D)

What do I call you anyway? As I sit
here talking to myself like a
psycho?

PRET

My official designation is Pret 256.7,
Class B if that helps.

SHIVANI

Iss duniya mein probably not, no. How
about...Pretna?

PRET

Is that a pun on my name?

SHIVANI

You threatened to eat me but the punning is a problem?

PRET

I never said it's an issue. I like it, thank you.

SHIVANI

Sure.

The thali is presented in front of SHIVANI. She spears through the moussaka, the spaghetti and cheese oozing in a cheesy, gooey delicious mess. Shivani/Pretna closes her eyes as she starts looking more human.

PRETNA

This feels warm... And heavy and delicious as it goes down our throat.

SHIVANI

Cheese and sauce'll do that...Even too much of it. Oh, try the dal and roti, that's different.

Shivani starts to dig in more, stuffing her mouth, spurred by Pretna's eagerness to taste more.

PRETNA

Is this why she likes it? It feels so... full and heavy, the milk of cows.

SHIVANI

(mouth full)

That's definitely one way to phrase it but not really. Fusions are trendy.

Shivani chews quietly as she becomes more somber. She looks at the door, waiting for it to open. The door opens and Shivani nearly chokes in her eagerness to swallow as two young women walk through. One of them reaches over to whisper in her ear, her arm touching her waist surreptitiously. The other giggles at her fondly. She looks down and sees the mish-mash of foods. The food now looks rotten and disgusting.

PRETNA

I didn't do that.

SHIVANI

Fuck, it's a Wednesday. She won't be here.

INT: VAISHALI RESTAURANT, TWO HOURS LATER.

SUPERIMPOSE TEXT:

TITLE CARD: MYSORE MASALA DOSA WITH 2X CHUTNEY AND SAMBAR. 9 HOURS LEFT.

Shivani sits right next to the door, as a harried waiter brings a nearly overflowing huge dosa and chutney and sambar and drops it at her table.

SHIVANI

Here, I ordered the food first.
Happy?

PRETNA

Much obliged.

Shivani throws up her very alive and human finger at the air as Pretna/Shivani eagerly tears into the delicious dosa and coconut chutney. The cutlery next to Shivani shows a denser, more human-looking Pretna.

SHIVANI

Whoa, do ghosts put on weight immediately?

PRETNA

Nowhere to go but up my dear Shiv.

SHIVANI

Remind me not to make you my brownie and ice-cream then, you might just want to remain human then.

PRETNA

That is my fondest wish.

SHIVANI

Can't believe ghosts get hangry.

PRETNA

I feel what you feel Shiv.

Shivani feels a little called out but accepts it and keeps eating. Shivani suddenly spies an older man, short in shorts and cardigan in his 60's talks to the waiter rapidly in Marath. His wife, a woman in her 50's sits there placidly, swaying to and forth. Suddenly she grabs for his hand as if starving for his touch. The man allows her to grab it.

PRETNA (CONT'D)

This is so different from the warmth and heaviness of the milk, but I do appreciate the taste of this, especially with this spicy concoction...

The chutney and sambar curdles in its small bowl. The dosa hardens like a two-day croissant.

PRETNA (CONT'D)

Can you be calm for just a second?

SHIVANI

I didn't want to come to this stupid city in the first place.

PRETNA

And I don't want to be hungry.

SHIVANI

Then eat the fucking dosa.

PRETNA

You don't want to!

SHIVANI

What difference does that make--Eat the fucking--

Shivani tries to shove dosa into her mouth but as she tries, the dosa burns to a crisp as Pretna stops her, her eyes glowing yellow. Shivani drops the dosa. Shivani struggles and stabs herself with a fork shallowly and Pretna recedes, her horrified face reflected in the fork, feeling pain for the first time.

SHIVANI (CONT'D)

I'm done with this--this bhoot tamasha.

Shivani reaches for her phone in her pocket and scrolls through Amrita's profile again. It's been updated with a selfie of Amrita in Camp, with a stall called "Prasad Uncle's Chaat for Guys, Girls and Ghosts." in the background.

SHIVANI (CONT'D)

Take me to her right now or you can go back to your hell.

Shivani and Pretna disappear from the restaurant, leaving nothing but half-eaten dosa and chutney and sambar.

SUPERIMPOSE TEXT:

TITLE CARD: PAV BHAJI WITH TWO EXTRA PAV AND BUTTER, 8 HOURS TO GO. 2 HOURS LEFT.

EXT: PRASAD UNCLE CHAAT FOR GUYS, GIRLS AND GHOSTS, CAMP, NIGHT.

Shivani materializes in front of the stall directly, gasping and heaving. The stall owner, tired and over it, blinks at her with no surprise, as he consults his wrist watch.

SHIVANI (CONT'D)

Prasad Uncle, ek pav bhaji, pyaaz aur butter bhar ke.

(Prasad Uncle, one pav bhaji, fill it with onion and butter)

PRASAD UNCLE

(in Marathi)

What a generation, thinks a hungry ghost can solve your problems.

SHIVANI

What?

PRASAD UNCLE

Spicy as usual, beta?

SHIVANI

Ha, uncle.

AMRITA

Shivani?

Shivani turns around to see a slightly drunken Amrita, waddling up in her heels to her and gives her a hug, Shivani freezes unable to return it.

AMRITA (CONT'D)

Nice to see you out and about...The usual ha Uncle?

PRASAD UNCLE

Ha, ha. Pata hain beta.

As Prasad Uncle gets busy making the pav bhaji, Pretna's smoke figure reflects in the steel plates and ladle as it uncurls itself from Shivani and starts to wrap itself around Amrita as Shivani stares, mute.

SHIVANI

How are you?

AMRITA

Oh I'm great. I've already got a few sponsors on board, and I might be in line to one of five influencers to promote this new fusion restaurant. I'll probably couch that in between videos going to some stall like this, you know keep the authenticity authentic kinda thing. I even have another gay influencer in mind who usually does social justice things to partner up with me for Pride...

SHIVANI

The butch drag king one?

PRETNA

Just say "Feed me", and she'll be yours, Shiv.

SHIVANI

Shut up!

AMRITA

Good God, Shivani. Anyway she's hot and everything, I know. But you know, she's too mannish. But, you always had good ideas, what do you think about a photoshoot? You know something like just suggestive enough that'll go viral like when everyone on desi gay twitter thought Ali Sethi and Salman Toor like got married...

PRETNA

Feed me.

AMRITA

Okay Shivani this attitude is starting to pakaa me--

Amrita gasped as Pretna's smoke body went through her mouth and possessed her. Her eyes glint yellow and a near manic, hungry look in her eyes appears as Pretna's spirit fills her up with hunger and want.

Shivani can hardly breathe as Amrita shamelessly touches her arms, caressing her hands and arms. Prasad Uncle raises his eyebrows and shakes his head but chooses to concentrate on the bhaji.

SHIVANI

I missed you so much Amy.

Amrita says nothing, just looks hungry and needy, hugging her close and holds her hand as her eyes fill with tears.

AMRITA

Is this enough, Shivani?

Shivani winces as if her name is painful in her mouth.

SHIVANI

Amy?

Amrita finally opens her mouth to talk but the voice that comes is not hers.

PRETNA

That's what she calls you.

SHIVANI

But not like this. Why are you still talking?

PRETNA

I...I can't find anything she wants to say to you here.

Amrita closes her mouth and clutches her arm, playing with Shivani's fingers, barely seeming to stop her from kissing them. Shivani steps away just to grab a glass of water for herself and Amrita cries out, a mournful keening sound. Shivani flinches as she hurries back to her hugging her.

SHIVANI

Amy, Amy I'm here, I'm here, don't worry.

Amrita continues making that mournful keening sound as she gums herself on Shivani's fingers.

SHIVANI (CONT'D)

Do you still think I'm too mannish?

Amrita nods.

SHIVANI (CONT'D)

You could have given me time, to get comfortable to be on your videos, to be me. You could have stayed...just pretended.

Amrita hums happily.

SHIVANI (CONT'D)
Do you still hate my brownie and
ice-cream?

Amrita nods as she happily stays in Shivani's embrace.

SHIVANI (CONT'D)
I'm still hungry, Pretna.

Everything freezes in time and place, literally. Amrita, Prasad Uncle and even the streetlights don't flicker or move or breathe. Pretna steps out of Amrita like a ghost passing through a wall.

SHIVANI (CONT'D)
I'm sorry. This was wrong.

PRETNA
Why?

SHIVANI
Does it matter?

PRETNA
It matters to you.

SHIVANI
Are you asking because you care or
because I make a depressing
soulmate?

PRETNA
Are you that miserable that you'd
be willing to give yourself up
while I cavort with all the women
you've ever desired while you just
watch?

SHIVANI
Atleast I wouldn't be alone!

Shiv screams in frustration and cathartic anger, kicking stones and the edge of the stall multiple times and sits down crying. Pretna floats towards her, lifting her face to look up at her.

PRETNA
Shiv.

SHIVANI
Just because I like it doesn't mean
you have to use it.

PRETNA

And you picked perfectly, you
madcap Sapphist of masculinity.

.

Shiv chuckles through her tears.

SHIVANI

There's a shorter term for that
now.

A silence passes.

PRETNA

How do you go about courting
depressing soulmates?

SHIV

Letting them apologise for being
the worst date?

PRETNA

That's a start.

Shiv gets up from her crouch and puts her hand out in a
formal handshake with the translucent ghost.

SHIV

My name's Shiv. I'm recently
single, in a city that I don't know
and I don't know what to do...But I
keep my promises.

SUPERIMPOSE TEXT:

TITLE CARD: BROWNIE AND ICE-CREAM, 6 AM,

INT: KITCHEN, SHIVANI'S APARTMENT, 6 AM, MORNING.

We see a absolute mess of a kitchen, chocolate and flour and
a stolen ice-cream maker strewn around everywhere. The pans
are piled up in the sink, left until the morning comes and
the roommates restore their new dwelling.

EXT: STAIRCASE, OUTSIDE SHIV'S APARTMENT, NIDHI APARTMENTS, DAWN.

Shiv comes out of her door with a shy grin on her face with a
plate of a sizzling brownie and cold vanilla ice-cream with two
spoons dug into it. We see her offer a second spoon to a almost
fully human Pretna, a plate with marks of chocolate and ice-cream
already present next to her. Pretna's face splits with a wondrous
grin with just a few too many teeth as she gazes wonderingly at
her new human form, and her new friend. Shiv offers her a second
spoon and puts down the plate for them to dig into it together.

THE END