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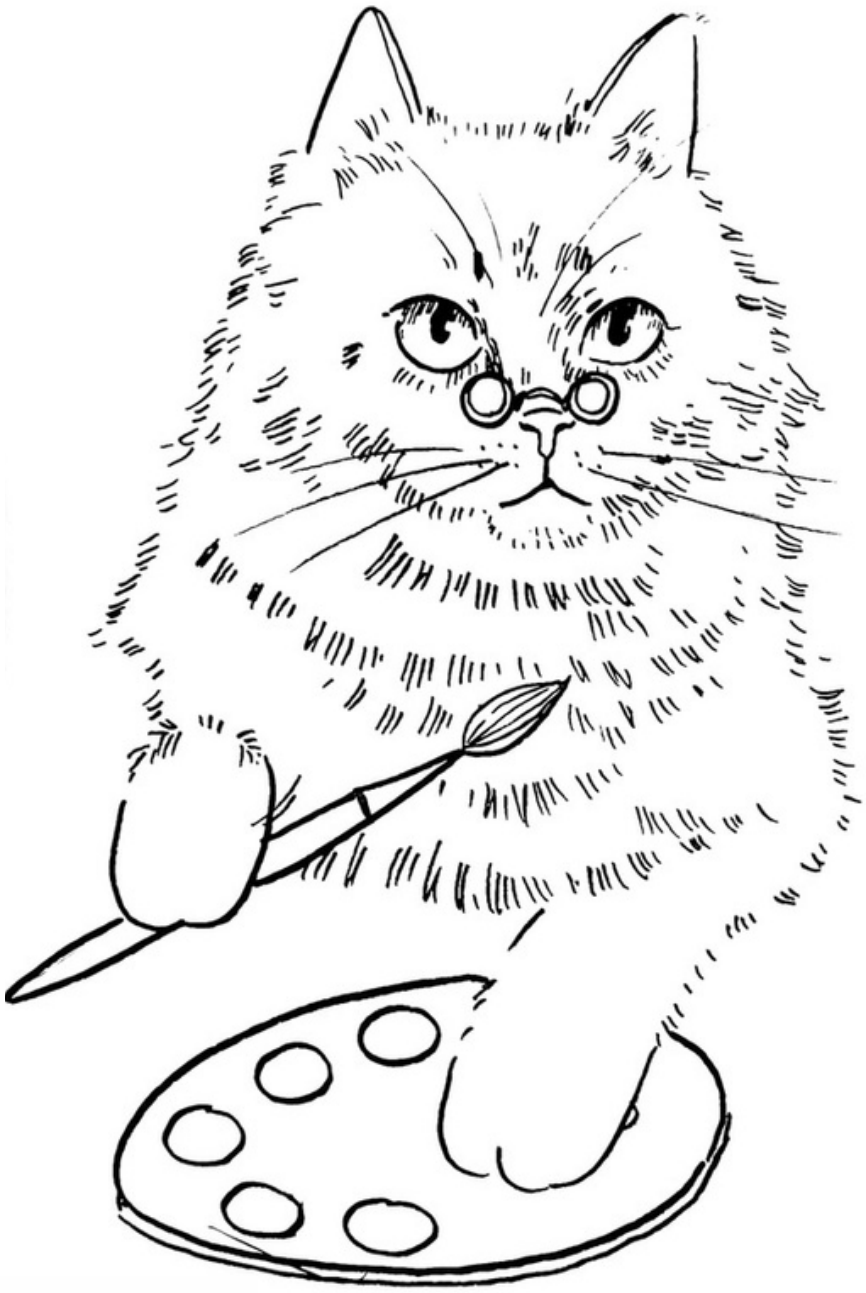
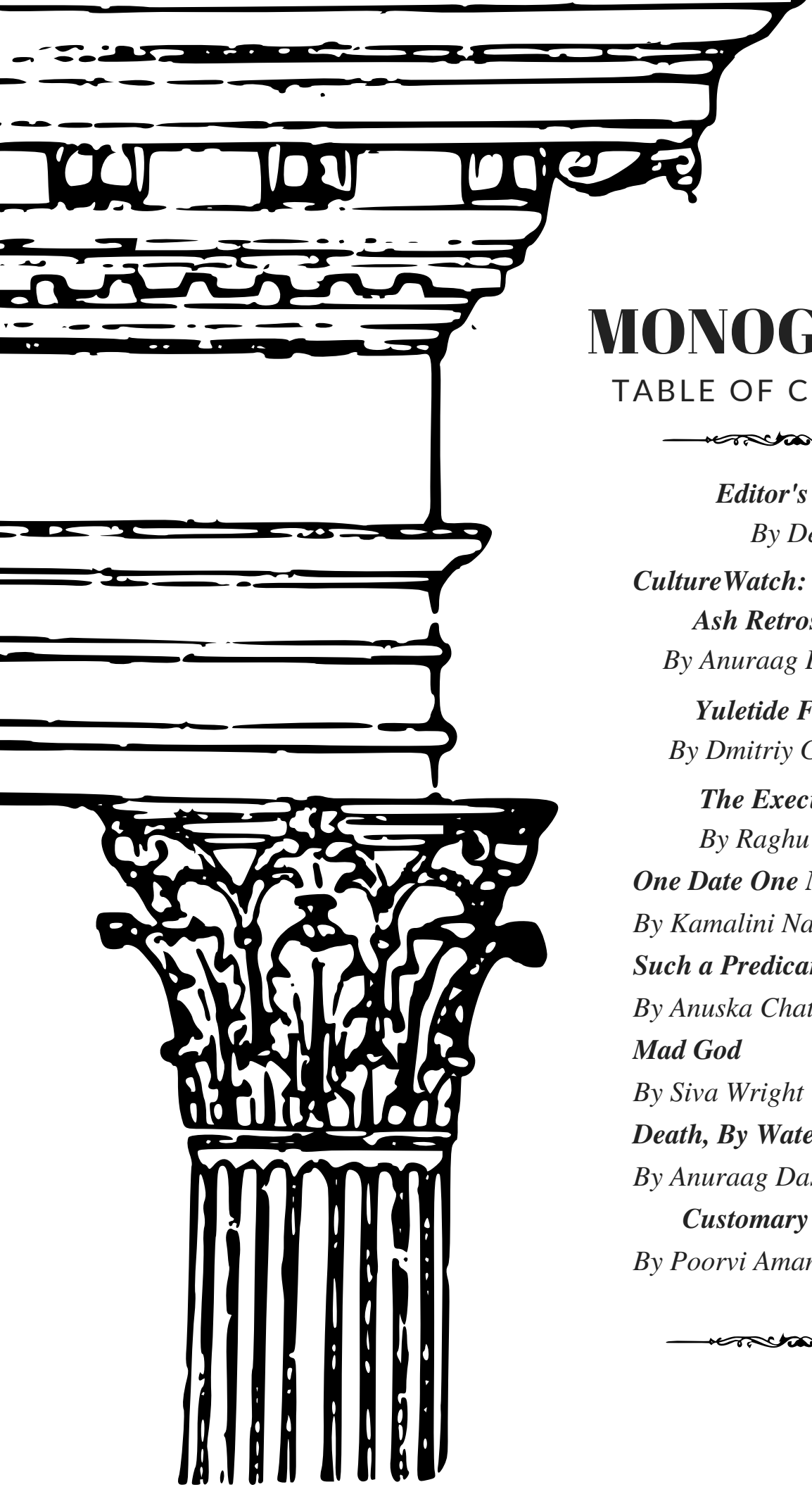


A STUDENT LED MAGAZINE FOR THE ARTS



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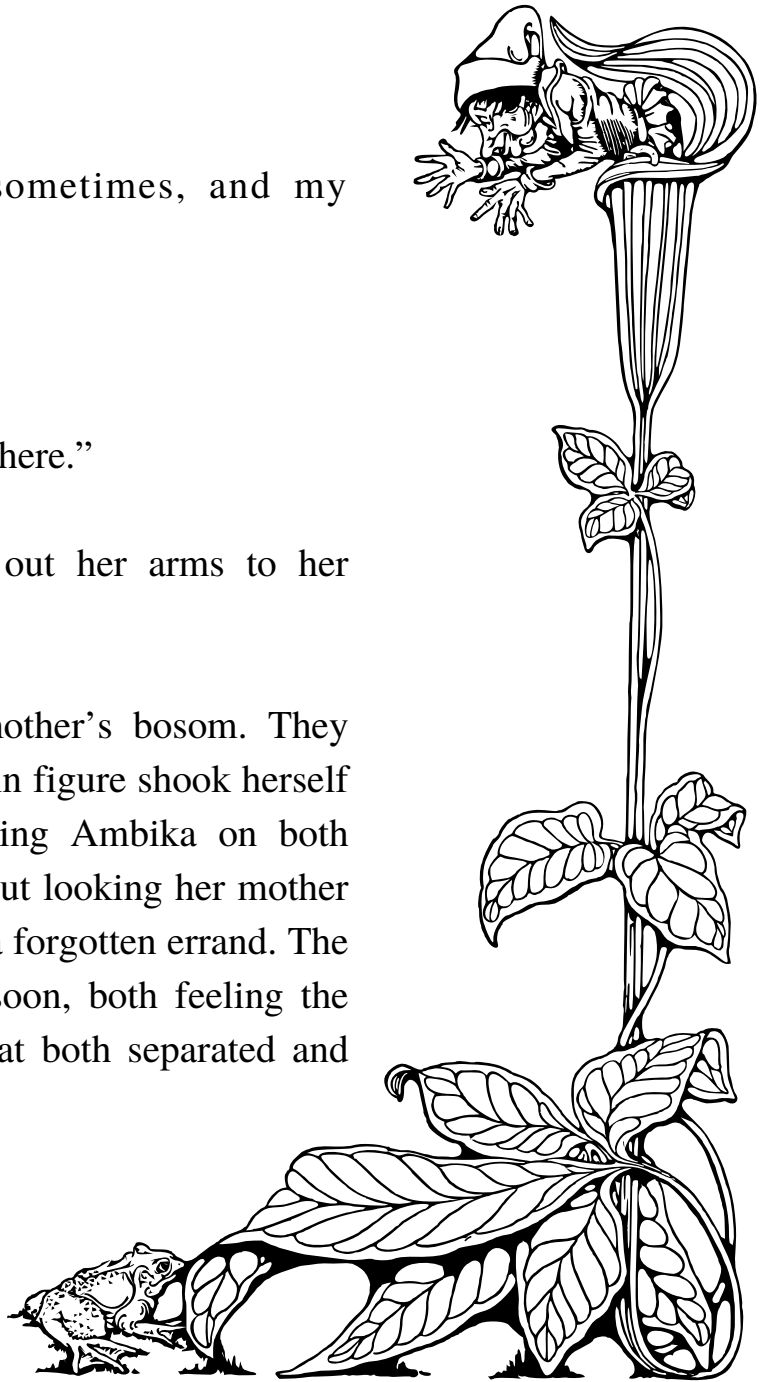
ONE DATE ONE NIGHT

KAMALINI NATESAN



"What did he say his name was?"

"He didn't. I didn't ask either."
Honestly, I forget how old you are sometimes, and my own age- thank you!"

"That has been known to happen."

"My turn to forget who I'm talking to, come here."

In the mellowest of tones, Ambika held out her arms to her favourite young person in all the world.

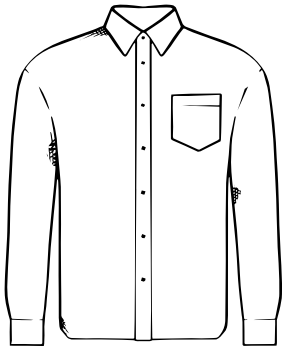
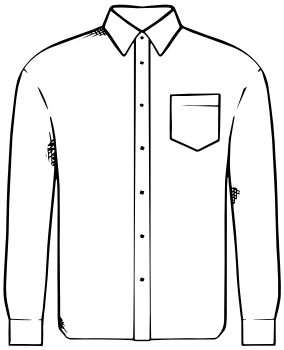
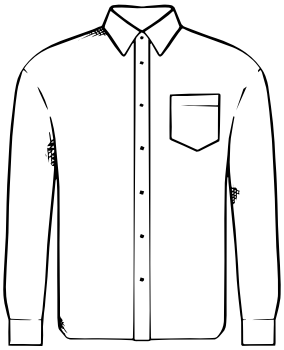
Wati's soft face burrowed itself in her mother's bosom. They stayed like that for a long minute, till the elfin figure shook herself free from her mother's stranglehold. Kissing Ambika on both cheeks, she scurried back to her room without looking her mother in the eye. It was as if she had remembered a forgotten errand. The moment of tenderness had passed all too soon, both feeling the weight of age on their relationship- one that both separated and bound them inextricably.

Ambika sat there wondering how and when her little Wati had turned into her confidante. Lightly moistening her cheeks were tears.
She smiled even as she trembled at the intensity of emotions that wound their way in and out of her heart with practiced ease. Love, one might call it, maternal love whose fount pours freely onto anyone in need. It keeps the fount itself from losing its inherent raison d'être.

His last name was Manot. The initial contact had gone off so well; intimate and comfortable. Yet the quivers and tremors of a first date left the woman in Ambika, feeling drained. When was the last time she had permitted herself to feel for a man? Too long, too far back to find again.
She fixed her eyes on the space between his shoulders, almost on his chin, looking up every once in a while, at his insistence. He had managed to awaken a desire to address her own needs. His eyes were kind. She wished she had the courage to keep looking at them, because in his gaze there lay a wish to recognize herself as a whole person, again. She liked him. Did he like her too?
But surely, he did, otherwise how did she feel what felt tangible and within reach?
It was an exchange, was it not, driven by mutual companionship? She had been mistaken before, but she was so much older now, yet remained inexperienced. Living itself matured a person, did it not! That's what Wati would say- little, wise Wati.

"*Mom, if you feel good in his company, it means he is equally invested, he is obviously in a good place with you. Duh.*"

The eleven-year-old was her counsellor, her mentor, her guide and her trainer. It was such a funny notion that Ambika broke into laughter in the dark balcony of their two-bedroom apartment.

It wasn't late, but the night held fast onto her secrets, a co-conspirator. There were no walkers on the street below, and the moon serenely looked down at creation, lending enough light upon the slim and tall trees in the opposite park, glinting watchmen-reminding Ambika that she was looked after, even guided. It was time to turn in with the novel she had been feeding her imagination with- 'The Tall Man with a Lantern' by Suhim Mavale.

The forty-year-old woman had been carrying the protagonist around in her mind when she met Manot. He was unlike the protagonist, who was not handsome, and was anything but rational. Manot seemed to carry a head about his shoulders, with a curly mop even if a receding hairline. His voice was sonorous and his white shirt was tucked tightly into a well-fitted pair of trousers. Ambika had dared stare after him, when he left the table to visit the washroom. He ordered a set dosa, while she ordered a cucumber sandwich. He ordered a coke while she ordered a Latte, as told to by daughter Wati. An obedient mother.

You're thinking about him, aren't you mom? Wati's voice resounded in Ambika's head, and she blushed.
Yes, my child, she responded to her mind's Wati.
I do like him, my child, I do.
But he's only one man. You need to meet many before you begin sinking your heart in this manner mom, echoed Ambika's mind-Wati.
Really, must I? Isn't one enough?
No.
Then how many?
Let's stop at seven- the days of the week, said Mind-Wati brusquely, not to be argued with.
Okay then.
Ambika pushed her face into the pillow, and fell asleep soon thereafter.
But only after checking on Wati in the flesh.

The little girl was fast asleep, an open textbook, pages flapping, on her chest, ceiling fan on high.The bed-lamp was beaming, lighting up the chiselled contours of her child's innocent face. Ambika sighed deeply, throwing a quiet kiss toward her daughter from the door, which she left ajar, fixing the door- stopper in its tracks to stop it from shutting in a sudden gust, frightening her child. Always a mother.

The following morning, Ambika received a request for another date from another man. Her mind was fixated on Manot and the protagonist of the novel, in unequal measure.
That evening, on arrival at the café, she found herself disinterested. The man, in his fifties she reckoned, was good-looking and insisted on ordering food for both. It was a lot of food and Ambika stuffed her face, even as her ears blotted the man's voice. He was moneyed, she could tell; his watch glinted, a slim gold band- subtly shone, and the leather wallet he swung out to pay, spelt class and bulged with notes, unusual for the day. Black money thought Ambika, and gulped uneasily. As for the man himself, he had lost before he had a chance; Ambika was in another world- besotted by a stranger she had met on one date, and one night.
The stilted quality of the conversation irritated her. This one was keen to impress Ambika, and was clearly nervous and over-eager. She felt powerful, watching the rich man stutter, even as she conjured up Manot in her mind. She wasn't quite there.
What had ensued between last night and this evening? How had a demure Ambika suddenly turned into a woman who wore self-confidence with panache?
She left soon after the bill was paid.

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"No Wati, there's nothing to report."
"Then tomorrow, we'll see what happens. Whoever calls, he's the one."

But you said seven days, seven men!" Ambika reminded Wati with a sardonic smile, while joy seized her on being granted permission to hone Manot as a possible suitor.

"When? That must be the one you talk to you in your head mom. I know you."
"Maybe Wati. Why are you so clever?"
"Because I am your daughter. Will you read to me tonight- from that book of yours?"
"No. Why? You read yours, I'll read mine."
"I've been reading yours too. I follow it. It's interesting and exciting."
Ambika stared at her daughter. Why was Wati reading adult books? Why couldn't she be like other eleven-year-olds? And what if she was, and Ambika had unfairly shunted her into adulthood? What a horrendous thought!

"No Wati, read your own."
"I know what happens to Vamshi, that weird character. He…."
"Stop Wati! I don't want to know. Go to your room!"

Ambika was fuming. Had she given Wati too long a rope? The little girl slunk away, although triumphant in the knowledge that she had read ahead of her mother.
Ambika did want to know what would happen, but not to Vamshi in the novel, but to Manot and her. She couldn't stop thinking about him and his hands on the table, his gaze upon her. Desire had reared its head somehow and she wanted this craving to stay even if she never gave in. It would be enough.

You're thinking about him, aren't you mom? Mind-Wati asked her mom, appearing at the appointed hour.
I am. But you don't have to worry. I'll never leave you to be with someone else.
I'm not worried. I know you won't. I don't want you to either.
But you've got to get a life girl!
Do I? I'm already forty years old.
That's when life begins, I hear, Ambika's mind-Wati shot a wisecrack.
Yep, so I hear too. But your life hasn't even begun. I have to wait.
No, you don't. Go ahead, have an affair, have some fun mom.
I shan't!
I dare you! If not now then your life will have flowed by, like a sad river, and I'll be off to college with you floundering- lonely and loveless.

Mind-Wati was persistent tonight.
Okay then, I'll call Manot.
There was a message waiting from the man, already.
"May we meet again?"

Ambika's heart fluttered: he liked her. He wanted her.
"Yes!"
"Wait on your balcony, I'll come by at 9. Will I get an invitation for a night cap?"

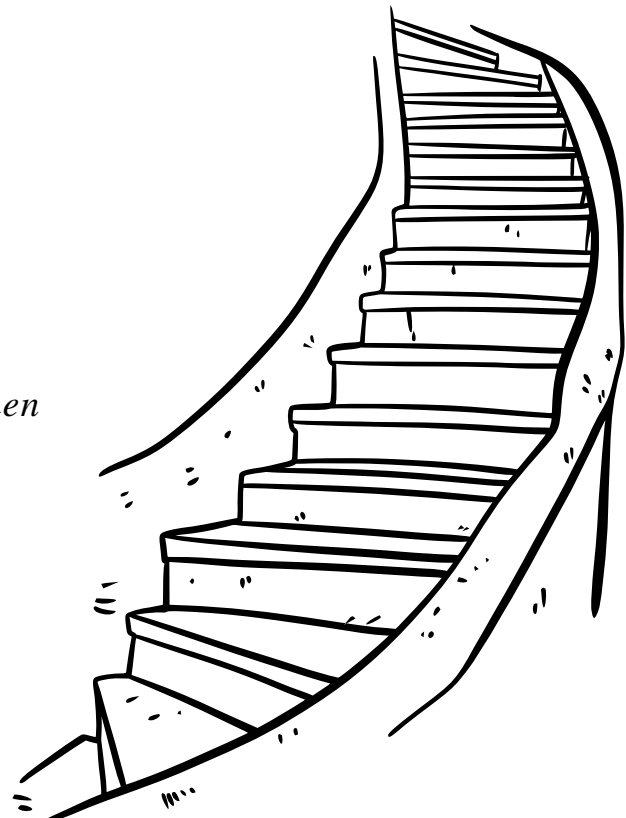
Ambika was flustered. Mind-Wati was quiet. There was no guidance forthcoming. What should she do? A yes would mean a clear invitation for physical interaction, and a no might push him away.

Mind-Wati where are you? Tell me what to do. Ambika begged.
But Mind-Wati's silence should've been answer enough.

Ambika plunged.
"Yeah, come along, I'll be waiting."
Manot never came.
The following morning Ambika confessed to Wati, whose prompt response to her mother was to move on from a person who was unreliable.

On Day 6, Roshni, their downstairs neighbour, accosted Ambika handing over a number of dried bouquets.

"Oye Ambika! Secret admirer and all ey!"
"What rubbish! What's all this?'
"Someone's been having these dropped for the past few days. Please take them off my hands. I kept missing you- you're either off early, or returning when I'm out."
"Oh! Okay!"
"Enjoy! Wish I had your luck yaar!"



"Don't complain, your hubby spoils you, Roshni. Thanks for these!"

Ambika was puzzled by the lack of any note attached to the dying stems. She threw them away hastily and left for work. Later she wondered if she hadn't been too quick in discarding flowers that might've carried a secret message. She soon banished the thought, attributing it to an arising need to be openly desired by Manot. Later that day, Ambika received a fresh bouquet of red roses with a long note. Roshni handed the bouquet over with a wicked grin.

"I was so embarrassed that night dear Ambika. I pushed my luck. I shouldn't have asked to come over. These bouquets are to make up for my misdemeanor, if possible. I'm just a man who found a woman he fell for. I wish I had the patience and discretion to wait. I hope you are still willing to build a friendship with this man?"
Ambika's heart raced, and bloomed all at once.

"You're thinking of Manot. These roses- from him, right?"

The rising euphoria was broken by Wati's query. She turned to find her little girl grinning conspiratorially. She held her mother tightly around the waist and peered into her eyes, all-knowing.
For a brief moment, Ambika wondered how a child could express so much joy for her mother's life, when her own young life had barely seen any. Her father had abandoned them when Wati turned seven, yet the little girl had hardly exhibited any remorse, or regret. What might be relentlessly deepening or intensifying in this little girl, who was to tell. Ambika quickly shook herself free – she would need time and space to dwell on this matter, perhaps another day.
For the moment that one date night would have to be enough to further a semblance of normalcy, hopefully in both their lives.
She picked up her mobile, and Wati's sweet face stared back at her. She put it face down, fingers trembling, and then speedily picked it up again, and replaced the screen saver with a picture of a baby elephant she had clicked at Corbett National Park the previous year, to celebrate Wati's tenth birthday.
"That's me!" Wati had announced, laughing madly.